



THE BEST THIRTEEN

*A collection of the best stories from 13 languages
of India*



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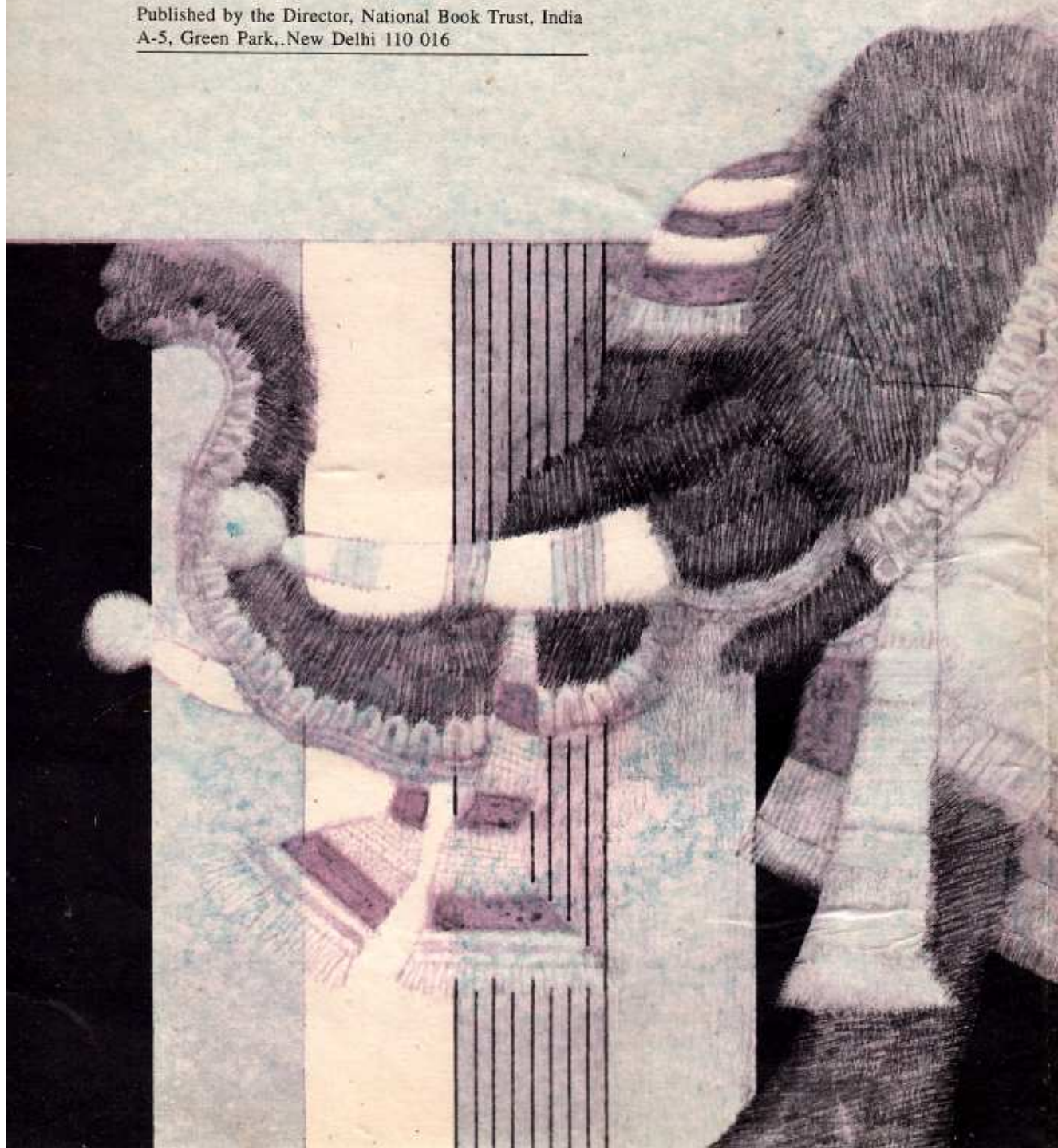
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Nehru Bal Pustakalaya

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*A collection of the best stories from 13 languages
of India*

Illustrated by
MICKEY PATEL



National Book Trust, India



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The Special Prize

by Anant Dev Sharma

What a naughty boy! He deserves to be thrashed. I have also received reports of his getting into fights with other boys. Send for him. "Mohan! Hey, Mohan!" the headmaster shouted for the chowkidar. Mohan guessed from the growl in the voice that the headmaster was very angry. He rushed in and asked apprehensively, "Yes, Sir?"

"Hurry and get Tapan of Class V," the headmaster ordered.

Let me introduce the reader to the boy named Tapan. He is the second son of Ratan the clerk of Padumani village. Although rather thin, he is strong, somewhat dark and has bright eyes. He is quite good at his studies. But both at home and outside, there is no end to his pranks. He is always getting into trouble. But it must be admitted that he is never the first to pick a quarrel. But if anybody offends him he never hesitates to give as good as he gets. He is the leader of his age-group and is always ready to take up the cudgels on their behalf. He is popular and respected by his companions.

After completing primary school at the village, Tapan had gone for a year to a High School, fifteen miles away and stayed with his uncle. Now he is back home and is studying at Jnanpeeth High School, a mile and a half from his village.

He had only been at Jnanpeeth a month and already there was a complaint against him. Haren, the shopkeeper of Padumani village, had complained to the headmaster that Tapan and a number of other boys had without provocation thrown stones at his shop the previous evening. Tapan had been the ring-leader.

Tapan came in with the chowkidar and after glancing timidly at the headmaster stood with head lowered. Swinging his cane the headmaster demanded, "You are Tapan aren't you?"

"Yes, Sir," Tapan replied politely.

"Do you know this gentleman?" the headmaster asked pointing at the shopkeeper.

"Yes, Sir. He lives in our village."

"Well, is it true that last evening you and your friends threw stones at his shop? Tell me the truth, or I will flog the skin off your back."

"Yes, Sir. It is true that I threw stones at his shop with Ratan and others."

"Why? Why did you do that, you rascal? Answer me," the headmaster thundered.

"Sir, this man cheats. He charges higher prices and gives less. Moreover, he has introduced a new kind of paper bag which is padded at the bottom. The day before yesterday we bought a kilo of *dal* from him. When we weighed the contents at home, it turned out to be only eight hundred grammes. The padding in the bag weighed fifty grammes; he had short-weighted one hundred and fifty grammes. It is common knowledge in the village. When I questioned him about it yesterday he abused me and chased me out of his shop. That is why I and the other boys threw stones at his shop."

The headmaster looked at the shopkeeper; his face was crimson.

The headmaster thought for some time. Then turning to Tapan he said, "Even so, what you did was not right. It is wrong to harm the property of others. If the shopkeeper is dishonest it is for the Government or the village panchayat to take up the matter. It is none of your business. Hold out your hand!" Tapan received five strokes of the cane. When he returned to his class, his classmates looked at him sideways and sniggered.

There was another incident a few days later. It concerned a fierce ox which was menacing the locality. It had gored several people. If anyone approached it with a stave it would charge at them. Everyone was terrified of it.

The effrontery of the animal aroused Tapan's spirit. "Wait, you big bully! I will tame you," he mumbled. During the school-break he brought a stave and a piece of string and slowly approached the ox. Waiting for the right opportunity he jumped onto its back and put the string in its mouth as if bridling a horse. The ox was taken by surprise but the moment it felt the weight on its back it started stamping, and buckling. It broke into a gallop hoping to throw the tormentor off its back. Meanwhile the school-break was over and

class had resumed but Tapan was busy taming the ox. He managed to keep himself on the back of the tossing, buckling bronco, holding the string firmly. He patted the ox's back. That further enraged the animal. It crashed into the school compound and then into the room of Class VII. The teacher and students were petrified and scattered in all directions, shoving and pushing their way out of the classroom. In the stampede many of them stumbled and fell. The teacher, Rajani Saharia, managed to escape unhurt by running outside. Several glass-panes were broken by the horns of the wildly prancing animal. Finally, the dazed ox ran bellowing desperately into the school field and fell on its side. A few seconds later it jumped up and ran for its life, without a backward glance.

So there was another complaint lodged against Tapan; this time by the teacher Rajani Saharia. The headmaster flew into a rage. The boy was a menace and a trouble-maker. Not only the students but even the school building had suffered. The headmaster summoned Tapan again.

Tapan appeared with Mohan the chowkidar. On seeing him the headmaster's temper boiled over.

"You are a wicked boy! Why did you lead the ox into the classroom? Speak up!" the headmaster demanded, brandishing his cane.

Tapan replied, head lowered, "Sir, I didn't lead the ox into the classroom. I was only riding on its back to tame it, and it suddenly ran into the room."

"Who asked you to ride an ox during school hours? Hold out your hand."

Tapan received fifteen strokes of the headmaster's cane. His classmates again sniggered and ridiculed him. He was branded the bad boy of the school.

Soon afterwards a notice was circulated in the school. It read: Tapan of Class V has been given fifteen strokes for riding an ox into Class VII and upsetting the teacher and students; also for causing breakage of glass-panes; he has been further fined Rs 25.00 to pay for the damage. The notice concluded that Tapan would be expelled from school if he committed any such offence in future. A few boys who came out of their classes on the pretext of spitting outside made faces at Tapan.





On the same evening the headmaster had returned home, had his tea and was taking a stroll. This was his daily routine. Dusk was falling as he was on his way back when he saw the school's bad boy. Tapan was holding an old beggar woman's hand, while on his head he carried her begging basket. Walking alongside jeering at him were two boys of his class—Naren, the one who came first, and Mahesh. The old woman had fever. It had come on her during her begging round. She could hardly walk, leave alone carry her basket. On seeing the plight of the old woman Tapan had lifted her basket on his head and taking the old woman's hand said, "Granny, hold on to me. I'll walk you home."

When Naren and Mahesh saw the headmaster they saluted him and looked at Tapan with a derisive smile, pleased that the headmaster was witnessing himself one of Tapan's misdeeds. When the headmaster questioned the old woman she told him how Tapan had come forward to help her. Her voice trembling she pointed to Tapan and said, "Had this dear boy not been there, I would still have been lying on the road. May God shower him with blessings. The other two boys there also saw how ill I was but far from lending a hand they have been making fun of this dear boy. How heartless they are." The old woman began panting for breath. The headmaster scolded Naren and Mahesh and sent them away. He asked Tapan to take the old woman to her home.

Two weeks later the headmaster was returning home from his walk. On the road he saw the ox lying with a leg broken and kneeling besides it was Tapan rubbing some medicine on its injured leg and bandaging it. There were tears in Tapan's eyes. He was startled when the headmaster came and stood near him. He saluted the headmaster with folded hands. The headmaster asked, "What are you doing here, Tapan?"

"Sir, some wicked boys have broken the ox's leg. It is in great pain. Sir, is it not wrong to hurt dumb animals?" Tapan asked sadly.

"Didn't you ride this same ox the other day, saying that it was wicked and needed to be tamed? How has it become so good in your eyes today?"

"Well, Sir, it was very wicked. But since the day I rode it, it has reformed. It has not only stopped attacking people but even makes way for them. So they shouldn't have hurt it. It is in agony.

I have chewed a few medicinal leaves and dressed the injured leg with the pulp. I have heard Father say that it is very good for injuries, Sir," Tapan said, his heart full of sympathy for the ox and his eyes brimming with tears.

The headmaster stood engrossed in thought. Then he looked at Tapan's face and affectionately patted him. Without a word, he started on his way home. His eyes were moist.

It was the prize-giving day of Jnanpeeth High School. The principal of a Gauhati college had been invited to preside over the function. This time the headmaster Rabin Barua had decided to award a special prize to the student with the best character. Three books—the biographies of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Lal Bahadur Shastri, were to be given as prizes.

In the classrooms students were discussing the special prize. In Class V Naren laughed jeeringly and said loudly to Bhabesh, sitting next to him, "Do you know Bhabesh that the special prize for the best character is being awarded to Tapan?" The boys roared with laughter. Tapan's face grew red with humiliation and shame. He wished the ground would swallow him up.

The function started. After the welcome of the president the secretary's report was read. This was followed by a programme of songs, dances and recitations by the students. Then the president delivered his speech and a few others also spoke. Next came the distribution of prizes. The awardees glowed with pleasure and pride. Then came the time for the announcement of the special prize. Everyone waited expectantly. Addressing the assembly the headmaster announced, "Honourable President and respected ladies and gentlemen, it has been decided to give the special prize for the student with the best character to Shriman Tapan Hazarika of Class V."

The teachers and students were dumbfounded. The faces of Naren and Bhabesh were a sight to see. Tapan could not believe his ears. He could not muster the courage to get up to go to receive the prize. The headmaster repeated, "Tapan Kumar Hazarika, Class V." His head reeled. Could it be true that he, known as the bad boy of the school, was being called to receive the best-character prize? Tapan stood up, went to the president, did *namaskar* and received the prize.

The headmaster then narrated how Tapan had helped the old beggar woman and nursed the injured ox. He also gave Tapan five rupees from his own pocket. The hall resounded with applause. Tapan's eyes glistened with tears of joy.

Translated from Assamese by Birendra Nath Dutta

The Hungry Septopus

by Satyajit Ray

When the doorbell rang again I made an involuntary sound of annoyance. This was the fourth time since the afternoon. How could one do any work? And Kartik too had conveniently disappeared on the pretext of going to the market.

I had to stop writing. When I got up and opened the door, I did not at all expect to see Kanti Babu.

"What a surprise," I said. "Come in, come in."

"Do you recognise me?"

"Well, I nearly didn't."

I brought him in. Indeed, in these ten years his appearance had changed a lot. Who would now believe that in nineteen fifty this man used to hop around in the forests of Assam with his magnifying glass. He was nearing fifty when I met him there, but he did not have a single grey hair. His zest and energy at that age would have put a young man to shame.

"I notice you have kept up your interest in orchids," he remarked.

I did have an orchid in a pot on my window, a present Kanti Babu had given me long ago, but it would be wrong to say I had kept up my interest. He had aroused my curiosity about plants. But after he left the country I slowly lost interest in orchids, as I gradually lost interest in most of the other hobbies I had. The only thing that absorbs me now is my writing. Times have changed. It is possible to earn a living by writing and I can almost support my family on the income from my three books now. I still have my job in the office. But I am looking forward to a time when I'll be able to give that up and devote myself entirely to writing, with occasional breaks for travel.

As he sat down Kanti Babu suddenly shivered.

"Are you feeling cold?" I asked. "Let me close the window."

The winter this year in Calcutta..."

"No, no," he interrupted. "I get these shivers occasionally. Growing old, you know. It's my nerves."

There were so many things I wanted to ask him. Kartik had returned, so I told him to make some tea.

"I won't stay long," Kanti Babu said. "I happened to see one of your novels. Your publishers gave me your address. I must tell you I've come here with a purpose."

"Tell me what I can do for you. But tell me...when did you return? Where have you been? Where are you now? There's a lot I want to know."

"I returned two years ago. I was in America. Now I live in Barasat."

"Barasat?"

"I have bought a house there."

"Is there a garden?"

"Yes."

"And a greenhouse?"

Kanti Babu's earlier house had an excellent greenhouse for his rare plants. What a fantastic collection of unusual plants he had! There were some sixty or sixty-five varieties of orchids alone. One could easily spend a whole day just looking at the flowers.

Kanti Babu paused a little before answering me.

"Yes, there is a greenhouse."

"That means you are still as interested in plants as you were ten years ago?"

"Yes."

He was staring at the northern wall of the room. I looked in the same direction: the skin of a Royal Bengal tiger complete with head was hung up there.

"Do you recognise him?" I asked.

"It is the same one, is it not?"

"Yes, see that hole near the ear?"

"You used to be a crack shot. Are you still as good?"

"I don't know. I have not tested myself for some time. I gave up hunting some seven years ago."

"But why?"

"I had shot enough. I am getting on too, you know. Don't feel

like killing animals any more.”

“Have you turned vegetarian?”

“No.”

“Then what is the point? Shooting only means killing. You shoot a tiger, or a crocodile or a buffalo. You get the skin, or stuff the head, or mount the horns to decorate your wall. Some people admire you, some shudder when they look at your trophies. To you they are the reminders of your adventurous youth. But what happens when you eat your goat or your chicken or *hilsa*? You are not just killing them, but chewing and digesting them as well. Is that in any way better?”

There was nothing I could say in reply. Kartik brought us tea. Kanti Babu was quiet for a while. He shivered once more before picking up the tea cup. After a sip he said, “It is a fundamental law of nature that one creature should eat another and be eaten by a third. Look at that lizard waiting there patiently.”

Just above the calendar of King and Co. a lizard had fixed its unblinking gaze on a moth. We looked at it: at first motionless, it then advanced in slow cautious movements and finally in one swoop it caught the moth.

“Well done,” Kanti Babu commented. “That will do for his dinner. Food, food is the primary concern in life. Tigers eat men, men eat goats, and goats, what do they not eat? If you begin to reflect on this, it seems so savage and primitive. But this is the law of the universe. There is no escape from it. Creation would come to a standstill if this process were to stop.”

“It might be better to become a vegetarian,” I ventured.

“Who says so? Do you think leaves and vegetables do not have life?”

“Of course they do. Thanks to you and Jagdish Bose I am **always aware** of that. But it is not the same kind of life, is it? **Plants and animals can't be the same.**”

“You think they are quite different?”

“Aren't they? Look at their differences. Trees cannot walk, cannot express their feelings, and they have no way of letting us know that they can feel. Don't you agree?”

Kanti Babu looked as if he was about to say something but didn't. He finished his tea and sat quietly with lowered eyes for

sometime, then turned his gaze on me. His anxious, haunted stare made me uneasy with the apprehension of some unknown danger. How much his appearance had changed!

Then he began to speak very slowly. "Parimal, I live twenty-one miles from here. At the age of fifty-eight I have taken the trouble of going all the way to College Street to find your address from your publisher. And now I'm here. I hope you realise that without a special reason I would not have made this effort. Do you? Or have you lost your common sense writing those silly novels? Perhaps you are thinking of me as an interesting 'type' you can use in a story."

I blushed. Kanti Babu was not very wrong. Indeed I was toying with the possibility of using him as a character in one of my novels.

"If you cannot relate your writing to life, Parimal, your books will always remain superficial. And you must not forget that however vivid your imagination, it can never be stranger than truth.... Anyway, I have not come here to preach. As a matter of fact, I have come to beg you for a favour."

I wondered what kind of help he needed from me.

"Do you still have your gun, or have you got rid of it?"

I was a little taken aback at his question. What did he have in mind? I said, "I still have it, though it must be pretty rusty. Why do you ask?"

"Can you come to my house tomorrow with your gun?"

I looked at his face closely. He did not seem to be joking. "And cartridges too of course," he added. I didn't know what to say. Was he perhaps a bit touched in the head, I wondered, although his conversation did not show it? He had always been a bit eccentric, otherwise why should he risk his life in the jungle looking for strange plants?

"I don't mind coming with the gun," I said, "but I am very curious to know the reason. Are there wild animals or burglars around where you live?"

"I will tell you everything when you come. You may not finally need the gun, and even if you do, I promise I won't involve you in any act that is punishable by law."

Kanti Babu rose to go. Putting his hand on my shoulder he said, "I have come to you, Parimal, because when I saw you last

you like me were attracted to adventure. I have never had much to do with human society, and now my contact is even less. Among my few friends and acquaintances, I can think of no one with your gifts."

The thrill of adventure which I used to feel in my veins seemed to return momentarily. I said, "Tell me how to get there, and when, and where..."

"Yes, I'll tell you. Take the Jessore Road straight up to Barasat station, and then you'll have to ask. Anyone will be able to tell you about the Madhumurali lake, about four miles from the station. There is an old indigo planter's bungalow near the lake. Next to that is my house. I hope you have a car?"

"No, but I have a friend who does."

"Who is this friend?"

"Abhijit. He was with me in college."

"What sort of person is he? Do I know him?"

"Probably not. But he is a nice chap. I mean he is all right if you are thinking of trustworthiness."

"Well, bring him along then. Come at any rate. I don't have to tell you that the matter is urgent. Try to reach well before sunset."

* * *

We don't have a telephone in the house. I walked to the corner of the road and rang up Abhijit from the Republic Chemists.

"Come right over," I said. "I have something very important to tell you."

"I know. You want me to listen to your new story. I'm afraid I'll fall asleep again."

"It's not that. Quite a different matter."

"What is it? Why can't you speak up?"

"There's a mastiff pup going. The man's sitting in my house."

It was impossible to get Abhijit to stir out unless one used a dog as a bait. In his kennel he had eleven varieties of dogs from five continents, three of them prize winners. Five years ago he was not so crazy about dogs, but now he could think and speak of nothing else.

Other than his love of dogs, Abhijit had one good quality: a total faith in my ability and judgement. When no publisher would

agree to take my first novel, Abhijit bore the cost of production. He said, "I don't understand these things, but you have written it and so it cannot be downright trash. The publishers must be fools." The book sold rather well and brought me some fame, thus confirming Abhijit's faith in me.

When it turned out that the mastiff story wasn't true, I got what I deserved: one of Abhi's stinging whacks on the shoulder. But I didn't mind because Abhijit agreed to my proposal.

"Let's go. We have not had an outing for a long time. The last one was the snipe shooting out at the Sonarpur swamps. But who is this man? What is the story? Why don't you give me more details?"

"He did not give me any more details. How can I tell you more? But it is better that there should be some mystery. It gives us an opportunity to exercise our imagination."

"At least tell me who the man is."

"Kanti Charan Chatterjee. Does the name mean anything to you? At one time he was Professor of Botany at Scottish Church College. Then he left teaching to travel around collecting rare plant specimens. He did a lot of research and published some papers. He had a superb collection of plants—specially orchids."

"How did you meet him?"

"We were once together in the Kaziranga Forest bungalow in Assam. I had gone there hoping to bag a tiger. He was looking for *Nepenthes*."

"Looking for what?"

"*Nepenthes*. That's the botanical name. The pitcher plant to you and me. Grows in the forests of Assam. Lives on insects. I have not seen it myself, but this is what Kanti Babu told me."

"Insect-eater? A plant? Eats insects?"

"I can see you never read botany."

"No. I didn't."

"Well you don't have to be sceptical. You can see pictures of these plants in textbooks."

"Well, go on."

"There isn't much to say after that. I got my tiger and came back. He stayed on. I was scared that some day he would be bitten by a snake or attacked by a wild animal. We did not meet more than

once or twice after returning to Calcutta. But I thought of him often, because for a short time I too got hung up on orchids. He had told me he'd bring some new specimens for me from America."

"America? So he's been to America?"

"One of his research papers was published in a botanical journal abroad. He became quite well-known because of it and was invited to a conference of botanists. That was way back in fifty-one or two. After that I did not meet him until today."

"What did he do all these years?"

"I don't yet know. But I hope we will know tomorrow."

"He's not a crackpot, is he?"

"Not more than you at any rate. You and your dogs are no better than he with his plants."

We drove along Jessore Road towards Barasat Station in Abhijit's Standard. 'We' included, apart from Abhijit and I, a third creature: Abhijit's dog Badshah. This was my mistake. I should have known that unless specifically forbidden Abhijit was sure to bring one of his eleven dogs.

Badshah was a brown Rampur hound. Large and strong, he occupied the whole of the back seat. His face stuck outside the window, he seemed rather appreciative of the wide expanse of green paddy fields. Occasionally, he would snort contemptuously at the village dogs by the roadside.

When I had hinted that Badshah's presence may not be necessary on this trip, Abhijit had retorted, "I've brought him because I haven't much faith in your gunmanship. You have not touched a rifle for years. If there is danger Badshah will be more useful. His sense of smell is extraordinary and you know how brave he is."

There was no difficulty in finding Kanti Babu's house. We reached by about two-thirty in the afternoon. After we entered the gate a driveway led to his bungalow. At the back of the house there was a large dried up *shirish* tree next to a tin shed which looked like a factory. Facing the house, across the road, was the garden, and beyond the garden a longish tin shed in which a number of glittering glass cases stood, arranged in a row.

Kanti Babu welcomed us but frowned a little at Badshah.

"Is this dog trained?" he asked.

Abhi said, "He obeys me. But if there are untrained dogs around I can't say what he might do. Do you have dogs?"

"No, I don't. But please tie him up here to this window in the sitting-room."

Abhijit looked at me sideways and winked, but tied the dog up nevertheless like an obedient boy. Badshah registered a mild protest, but seemed to accept the situation.

We sat on cane chairs in the verandah outside. Kanti Babu told us that his servant, Prayag, had injured his right hand, so he himself had made some tea for us and kept it in a flask; we could ask for it when we wanted it.

I could not imagine what untold danger might be lurking in a peaceful place like this. Everything was quiet except for the chirping of birds. I felt very silly carrying the rifle and put it down against the wall.

Abhi is basically a city man who cannot sit still. The beauty of the countryside, the songs of unknown birds—these things don't move him much. He fidgeted for a while and then spoke abruptly, "I heard from Parimal how you were nearly killed by a tiger in the forests of Assam while looking for some outlandish plant."

Abhi is fond of making his speech dramatic by exaggerating things. I was afraid he might offend Kanti Babu. But he only smiled and said, "To you danger in the forest invariably means a tiger. doesn't it? Most people seem to think so. But... No I did not meet a tiger. Once, I was bitten by a leech, but that was nothing."

"Did you get the plant?"

"Which plant?"

"Pitcher or pewter or whatever plant you call it."

"Oh, you mean *Nepenthes*. Yes I did. I still have it. I'll show you. Now I have lost interest in most other plants except the carnivorous. I have disposed of most of the orchids too."

When Kanti Babu went inside, Abhi and I looked at each other. Flesh eating plants! I vaguely remembered a page from my botany textbook in college, and a few pictures seen fifteen years ago.

Kanti Babu returned with a bottle which turned out to be full of grasshoppers, beetles and other insects of assorted size. The stopper of the bottle was pierced with holes like the lid of a pepper pot. "Feeding time," he announced. "Come with me."

We proceeded to the tin shed which had glass cases under it. Each case contained a plant of a different kind, none of which I had seen before.

"These plants are not to be found in our country," Kanti Babu said. "None except the Nepenthes. One is from Nepal, another from Africa. The rest have all been brought from Central America."

Abhijit wanted to know how these plants stayed alive in our soil.

"They have nothing to do with the soil," Kanti Babu replied.

"How?"

"They do not get nourishment from the soil. Just as human beings get food from outside, and can comfortably survive in most countries besides their own, these too thrive as long as they get the right food, wherever they might be."

Kanti Babu stopped near one of the glass cases. Inside it was a strange plant with green leaves about two inches long, with serrated white edges like sets of teeth. The glass case had a round door the same size as the mouth of the bottle. With very swift movements Kanti Babu opened this door, uncorked the bottle and pushed the mouth of the bottle through the door. As soon as a moth emerged from the bottle, he quickly withdrew the bottle and shut the door. The moth flitted about for a while and then settled on a leaf. The leaf immediately folded itself in the middle and trapped the moth in a tight grip. The grooves of the teeth fitted into each other so snugly that the moth had no chance of escaping from this cage.

I had never seen a trap designed by nature which was so strange and so frightening.

In a choked voice Abhi asked, "Is there any certainty that the insect will always sit on the leaf?"

"Of course. These plants emit a smell which attracts insects. This one is called Venus' fly trap, brought from Central America. It is listed in all textbooks of botany," Kanti Babu said.

I watched the insect with fascination. It had thrashed about a bit at first, but now it looked listless. The pressure of the leaf on it increased. The plant was no less predatory than a lizard.

Abhi tried to force a smile. "It won't be a bad idea to have a plant like this in the house. Easy way to get rid of vermin. No more sprinkling of D.D.T. powder to kill cockroaches."

"No, this plant won't do," Kanti Babu said. "It won't be able to digest cockroaches. Its leaves are too small."

Inside the next glass case we saw a plant with long leaves like those of lilies. From the tips of each leaf hung a pouch-shaped thing. I recognised it from the pictures I had seen.

"This is the *Nepenthes* or the pitcher plant," Kanti Babu explained. "Its appetite is bigger. When I first got it I found the remains of a small bird inside the pouch."

"Good heavens!" Abhi shuddered. "What does it live on now?" His casual attitude was changing to awe.

"Cockroaches, butterflies, caterpillars, things like that. Once, I had caught a mouse in a trap, which I tried to feed to the plant, and the plant did not seem to mind. But overeating can be fatal for them. The plants are very greedy and do not know their natural limit."

We moved from one glass case to another with mounting fascination. Butter-wort, sundew, bladder-wort, some of these I recognised from pictures seen earlier, but the rest were totally strange and unbelievable. Kanti Babu had about twenty varieties of carnivorous plants, some of which were not to be found in any collection in the world.

The most exquisite of them was the sundew. It had glistening drops of water surrounding the furry texture of its leaf. Kanti Babu took a tiny piece of meat, about the size of a cardamom seed and tied it to a piece of string. When he gently lowered the string on the leaf, even with the naked eye we could see the hair on the leaf rear up greedily towards the meat.

Kanti Babu withdrew the string and explained that if he had lowered it further, the leaf would have grabbed the meat like the fly trap, and after squeezing out all the nourishment from it, would have thrown away the rest. "No different from the way you or I eat—what do you say?"

From the shed we came out into the garden. The shadow of the *shirish* tree had lengthened on the grass. It was about four in the afternoon.

"Most of these plants have been written about," Kanti Babu continued, "but the strangest specimen in my collection will not be *listed anywhere unless I write about it. That is the one you must*

see now. Then you will know why I have asked you to come today. Come Parimal, come Abhijit Babu."

We followed him towards the shed that looked like a factory. The padlocked metal door was flanked by two windows on either side. Kanti Babu pushed one open and peered in. Then he asked us to come and look. Abhi and I bent over the window.

The western wall of the room had two skylights high up near the ceiling, through whose glass panes some light filtered in to partially illuminate the place. What stood inside the room did not look like a plant at all. It resembled an animal with several thick antennae. Slowly we could distinguish the trunk of the tree rising up to about eight or ten feet. From about a foot below the top of the trunk and around it, sprouted the antennae. I counted seven of them. The trunk was pale and smooth with brown spots all over. The antennae appeared limp and lifeless now, but a shiver ran down my spine as I looked at them. When our eyes got used to the half-light we noticed another thing. The floor of the room was littered with feathers.

I don't know how long we stood transfixed. Finally Kanti Babu spoke, "The tree is asleep now, but it is almost time for it to wake up."

Abhi asked in a tone of disbelief, "It is not really a tree, is it?"

"Since it grows from the ground what else can it be called? Though I must say it does not behave very much like a tree. There is no name for it in the dictionary."

"What do you call it?"

"*Septopus*. In Bengali you might call it *saptapash*, *pash* meaning a coil or a knot, as in *nag-pash*."

As we walked back towards the house I asked him where he had found this specimen.

"In a dense forest near the Nicaragua lake in Central America," he said.

"Did you have to search very hard?"

"I knew it grew in that region. You may not have heard of Professor Duncan, the explorer and botanist. Well, he lost his life looking for rare plants in Central America. His body was never found and no one knows exactly how he died. This plant was mentioned in the last pages of his diary."

"I took the first opportunity to go to Nicaragua. From Guatemala onwards, I heard the local people talk about this plant, which they called the Satan Tree. Later I found quite a few of them, and actually saw them eating monkeys and armadillos. After a great deal of searching I found a plant small enough to take away with me. Look how much it has grown in two years."

"What does it eat now?"

"Whatever I give it. I have sometimes caught mice in a trap for it. I told Prayag if he ever finds a dog or a cat run over by a car, he should bring it for the plant. It has digested them too. I have given it whatever meat you and I eat: chicken, goat. But recently its appetite has grown so much that I cannot satisfy its demands any more. When it wakes up at about this time of day, it is very agitated and restless. Yesterday there nearly was a disaster. Prayag had gone inside the room to feed it chicken. It has to be fed the way an elephant is. First a lid opens at the top of the trunk. It takes the food up with one of the antennae and puts it inside the hole on top. Each time it puts some food inside the Septopus is quiet for a while. If after a while the Septopus begins to wave the antennae again, it means it is still hungry.

"Till now two chickens or a small goat a day used to be enough for the Septopus. Since yesterday something seems to have changed. Prayag came away as usual after the second chicken. When he could still hear the sound of thrashing antennae, he went in again to find out what the matter was.

"I was in my room, writing my journal. When I heard a sudden scream I rushed there. A gruesome sight greeted me: one of the Septopus' antennae held Prayag's right hand in a vice-like grip while Prayag pulled with all his strength to set it free. Another antennae was greedily approaching to take hold of him from the other side.

"Without losing any time I hit the antenna very hard with my stick. Then with both hands I pulled Prayag away and just managed to save him. What worries me most is that the Septopus tore off a bit of Prayag's flesh, and with my own eyes I saw it put it inside its mouth."

We had reached the verandah. Kanti Babu sat down and pulled out a handkerchief to wipe his forehead.

"I had never realised until now that the Septopus is attracted

to human flesh. It may be greed or it may be some kind of viciousness, but after what I saw yesterday, I have no alternative but to kill it. Yesterday I tried poisoning its food, but it is too clever for that. It touched the food with the antenna and threw it away. The only way left is to shoot it. Now you know, Parimal, why I have asked you to come."

I considered this for a while. "Are you sure a bullet can kill it?" I asked.

"I don't know whether it will die. But I am fairly certain that it has a brain. There is enough evidence that it can think. I have been near it so many times, but it has never attacked me. It knows me just as a dog knows its master. There may be a reason for its being aggressive with Prayag. You see, Prayag sometimes tries to tease the Septopus. He would tempt it with food and then withhold it—or take food very near its antenna and then take it away to see the fun. It does have a brain, and it is located where it should be, that is, in the head—the top part of the trunk around which the antennae have grown. That is the place where you will have to aim your shot."

Abhijit quickly butted in. "That is easy. You can find out in a minute. Parimal, take your rifle."

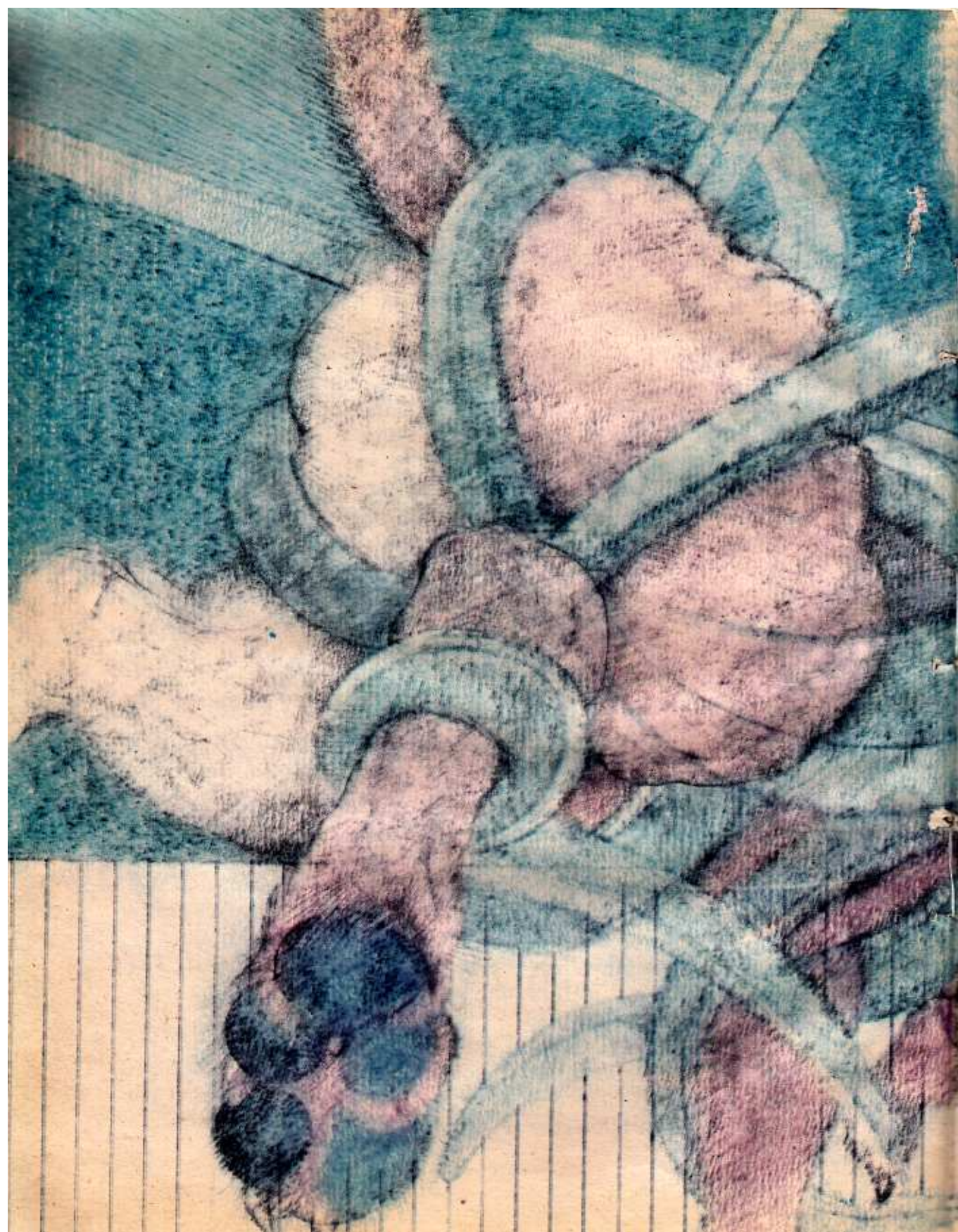
Kanti Babu raised his hand to stop him. "Does one shoot while the victim is asleep? Parimal, what does your hunting code say?"

"Killing a sleeping animal is against all codes. Specially when the victim cannot move. It is quite out of the question."

Kanti Babu brought the flask and served us tea. About fifteen minutes after we had finished drinking it the Septopus woke up.

For some time Badshah had been getting restless in the front room. But now a sudden swish and a whining sound made Abhi and I rush there to see what the matter was. Badshah was frantically trying to break free from the chain. Abhi tried to restrain him by raising his voice. Just then a strange sharp smell filled the air. The smell as well as a loud thrashing sound seemed to be coming from the direction of the tin shed.

It is difficult to describe the smell. I had to undergo surgery once in my childhood to get my tonsils removed. The smell brought back memories of the chloroform they had given me during the operation. Kanti Babu rushed into the room. "Come, it is time."





"What is that smell?" I asked.

"The Septopus. This is the smell they emit to attract food..."

Before he could finish, Badshah in one desperate pull managed to jerk open his collar, and pushing Kanti Babu down on the floor, rushed towards the source of the smell.

"Disaster!" Abhi shouted as he ran after the dog.

When I reached the tin shed with my loaded rifle a few seconds later, I saw Badshah disappear through the window in spite of Abhi's attempts to stop him. As Kanti Babu opened the padlock door we heard the death howl of the Rampur hound. We rushed in to find that one antenna was not enough to hold Badshah. The Septopus was enclosing the dog in a fatal embrace first with one, then with a second and a third antennae.

Kanti Babu yelled at us, "Don't go a step forward. Parimal, shoot."

As I was about to take aim Abhijit stopped me. I realised how much his dog meant to him. Heedless of Kanti Babu's warning he advanced towards the Septopus and wrenched free one of the three antennae that held Badshah.

My blood turned to water as I watched this frightening spectacle. All the three antennae closed in on Abhi now, letting go of the dog, while the other four slowly swayed forward like greedy tongues tempted at the prospect of human blood.

Kanti Babu urged, "Shoot, Parimal, shoot. There, at the head."

I fixed my eyes on the Septopus and watched a lid slowly open on the top of the trunk revealing a hole. The antennae were carrying Abhi towards that hole. Abhi's face was white and his eyes bulged.

In a moment of extreme crisis—I have noticed this before also—my nerves become calm and controlled as if by magic.

With steady hands I held my rifle and with unerring aim shot at the point between two round spots on the head of the Septopus.

I remember, too, the blood that spurted out like a fountain. I think I saw the antennae suddenly going limp, releasing their grip on Abhi. And then the smell grew and enveloped my consciousness.

* * *

It has been four months since that incident. I have at last been able to resume work on my incomplete novel.

Badshah could not be saved. Abhi has acquired a mastiff pup and a Tibetan dog in the meanwhile, and is looking for another Rampur hound. Two of Abhi's rib-bones had been fractured. After being in plaster for two months, he is on his feet again.

Kanti Babu came yesterday. He said he was thinking of getting rid of all his carnivorous plants. "I think I'll do some research on common domestic vegetables like gourd, beans and brinjal. You have done so much for me. If you want I'll give you some of my plants. The *Nepenthes* for example. At least your house will be free of insects."

"No, thank you," I said. "Throw them all out if you want to. I don't need a plant to rid my house of insects."

"Ditto, ditto," said the lizard from behind the calendar of King & Co.

Translated from Bengali by Meenakshi Mukherjee

Sita and the River

by Ruskin Bond

In the middle of the big river, the river that began in the mountains and ended in the sea, was a small island. The river swept round the island, sometimes clawing at its banks, but never going right over it. A small hut stood on the island, a mud-walled hut with a sloping thatched roof. The hut had been built into a huge rock, so only three of the walls were mud, and the fourth was rock.

A few goats grazed on the short grass which grew on the island. Some hens followed them about. There was a melon patch and a vegetable patch.

In the middle of the island stood a peepul tree.

It was an old tree. Many years ago, a seed had been carried to the island by a strong wind, had found shelter between two rocks, had taken root there, and had sprung up to give shade and shelter to a small family.

Grandfather was mending a fishing-net. He had fished in the river for ten years, and he was a good fisherman. He knew where to find the slim silver *chilwa* and the big beautiful *mahseer* and the long moustached *singhara*; he knew where the river was deep and where it was shallow; he knew which baits to use—which fish liked worms and which liked gram. He had taught his son to fish, but his son had gone to work in a factory in a city, nearly a hundred miles away. He had no grandson; but he had a granddaughter, Sita, and she could do all things a boy could do, and sometimes she could do them better. She had lost her mother when she was very small. Grandmother had taught her all the things a girl should know. But neither grandparent could read or write, and as a result Sita couldn't read or write either.

There was a school in one of the villages across the river, but Sita had never seen it. There was too much to do on the island.

While Grandfather mended his net, Sita was inside the hut,

pressing her grandmother's forehead, which was hot with fever. Grandmother had been ill for three days and could not eat. She had been ill before, but she had never been so bad.

When Sita noticed that Grandmother had fallen asleep, she tip-toed out of the room, and stood outside.

The sky was dark with monsoon clouds. It had rained all night, and in a few hours it would rain again. The monsoon rains had come early that year, at the end of June. Now it was the end of July, and already the river was swollen. Its rushing sound seemed nearer and more menacing than usual.

Sita went to her grandfather and sat down beside him beneath the peepul tree.

"When you are hungry, tell me," she said, "and I will make the bread."

"Is your grandmother asleep?"

"She sleeps. But she will wake soon, for she has a deep pain."

The old man stared out across the river, at the dark green of the forest, at the grey sky, and said, "Tomorrow, if she is not better, I will take her to the hospital at Shahganj. There they will know how to make her well. You may be on your own for a few days."

Sita nodded gravely. She wanted Grandmother to get well, and she knew that only Grandfather had the skill to take the small boat across the river when the current was so strong. Someone would have to stay behind to look after their few possessions.

Sita was not afraid of being alone, but she did not like the look of the river. That morning, when she had gone down to fetch water, she had noticed that the level of the river had risen. Rocks which were normally spattered with the droppings of water-birds had suddenly disappeared.

"Grandfather, if the river rises, what will I do?"

"You will keep to the high ground."

"And if the water reaches the high ground?"

"Then take the hens into the hut, and stay there."

"And if the water comes into the hut?"

"Then climb into the peepul tree. It is a strong tree. It will not fall. And the water cannot rise so high."

"And the goats, Grandfather?"

"I will be taking them with me, Sita. I may have to sell them,

to pay for food and medicines for your grandmother. As for the hens, if it becomes necessary, put them on the roof. But do not worry too much"—and he patted Sita's head—"the water will not rise so high."

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That evening it began to rain again. Big pellets of rain, scarring the surface of the river. But it was warm rain, and Sita could move about in it. She was not afraid of getting wet, she rather liked it. It was steamy indoors, and her thin dress would soon dry in the heat from the kitchen fire.

She moved about in the pouring rain, chasing the hens into a shelter behind the hut. A harmless brown snake, flooded out of its hole, was moving across the open ground. Sita picked up a stick, scooped the snake up, and dropped it between a cluster of rocks. She had no quarrel with snakes. They kept down the rats and the frogs.

When Sita finally went indoors, she was hungry. She ate parched gram, and warmed up some goat's milk.

Grandmother woke once, and asked for water, and Grandfather held the brass tumbler to her lips.

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It rained all night.

The roof was leaking, and a small puddle formed on the floor. Grandfather kept the kerosene-lamp alight. They did not need the light, but somehow it made them feel safer.

The sound of the river had always been with them, though they seldom noticed it; but that night they noticed a change in its sound. There was something like a moan, like a wind in the tops of tall trees, and a swift hiss as the water swept round the rocks and carried away pebbles. And sometimes there was a rumble, as loose earth fell into the water.

Sita could not sleep.

As soon as the first light showed through the little skylight, she got up and went outside. It wasn't raining hard, it was drizzling, but it was the sort of drizzle that could continue for days, and it probably meant that heavy rain was falling in the hills, where the river began.

Sita went down to the water's edge. She couldn't find her favourite rock, the one on which she often sat dangling her feet in

the water, watching the little *chilwa* fish swim by. It was still there, no doubt, but the river had gone over it.

She stood on the sand, and she could feel the water oozing and bubbling beneath her feet.

The sun was just coming up when Grandfather pushed off in the boat. Grandmother lay in the prow. She was staring hard at Sita, trying to speak, but the words would not come. She raised her hand in a blessing.

Sita bent and touched her grandmother's feet, and then Grandfather pushed off. The little boat—with its two old people and three goats—riding swiftly on the river, edged its way toward the opposite bank.

It bobbed about on the water, getting smaller and smaller, until it was just a speck on the broad river.

And suddenly Sita was alone.

There was a wind, whipping the raindrops against her face; and there was the water, rushing past the island; and there was the distant shore, blurred by rain; and there was the small hut; and there was the tree.

Sita got busy. The hens had to be fed. They weren't bothered about anything except food. She threw them handfuls of coarse grain, potato-peels and peanut-shells.

Then she took the broom and swept out the hut; lit the charcoal-burner, warmed some milk, and thought, "Tomorrow there will be no milk...."

Thunder rolled down from the hills. *Boom—boom—boom....*

Sita couldn't stay indoors for long. She went out, and stared out across the river, which looked much wider now. It had crept over its banks and spread far across the flat plain. Far away, people were driving their cattle through waterlogged, flooded fields, carrying their belongings in bundles on their heads or shoulders, leaving their homes, making for the high land.

There was water everywhere. The world had become one vast river. Even the trees on the forested side of the river looked as though they had grown from the water, like mangroves.

Sita's worst fears were confirmed when, a little later, she saw planks of wood, small trees and bushes, and then a wooden bedstead, floating past the island.

She decided to make herself a meal. When she looked outside, she saw pools of water amongst the rocks. She couldn't tell if it was rain-water or overflow from the river.

She had an idea.

A big tin trunk stood in a corner of the room. It had belonged to Sita's mother. She would stuff the trunk with everything useful or valuable, and weigh it down so that it wouldn't be carried away—just in case the river came over the island....

Grandfather's hookah went into the trunk. Grandmother's walking-stick went in too. So did a number of small tins containing pulses and spices. Even if Sita had to spend several hours in the tree, there would be something to eat when she came down again!

Sita was so busy packing the trunk that she paid no attention to the lick of cold water at her heels. She locked the trunk and placed the key high in a niche of the rock-wall, it was only then that she discovered that she was walking about on a watery floor.

She stood still, alarmed at what she saw. The water was oozing over the door-sill, pushing its way into the room.

Sita forgot about everything else. Darting out of the hut, she ran splashing through ankle-deep water towards the safety of the peepul tree. If the tree hadn't been there, such a well-known landmark, she might have floundered into deep water, into the river.

She climbed swiftly into the strong arms of the tree, made herself secure on a familiar branch, and thrust the wet hair away from her eyes.

* * *

She was glad she had hurried. The hut was now surrounded by water. Only the higher parts of the island could still be seen—a few rocks, the big rock into which the hut was built, a hillock on which some bushes grew.

The hens hadn't bothered to leave the hut. They were probably perched on the bedstead now.

The most unusual things went by on the water—an aluminium kettle, a cane-chair, a tin of tooth-powder, an empty cigarette packet, a wooden slipper, a plastic doll....

The water was higher now, the island fast disappearing.

Something came floating out of the hut.

It was an empty kerosene tin, with one of the hens perched on top. The tin came bobbing along on the water, not far from the tree, and was caught by the current and swept down the river. The hen still managed to keep its perch.

A little later the water must have reached the bed, because the remaining hens flew up to the rock-ledge and sat huddled there in the small recess.

Sita climbed a little higher, and, as she did so, a jet-black jungle crow settled in the upper branches. Sita saw that there was a nest in them, a crow's nest, an untidy platform of twigs wedged in the fork of a branch.

In the nest were four blue-green, speckled eggs. The crow sat on them and cawed disconsolately. But though the crow was miserable, its presence brought some cheer to Sita. At least she was not alone. Better to have a crow for company than no one at all.

Other things came floating out of the hut—a large pumpkin, and a red turban belonging to Grandfather, unwinding in the water like a long snake.

The tree shook in the wind and rain. The crow cawed and flew up; circled the tree a few times, and returned to the nest. Sita clung to her branch.

The tree trembled all through its tall frame. To Sita it felt like an earthquake tremor.

The river swirled all around her now. It was almost up to the roof of the hut. Soon the mud walls would crumble and vanish. Except for the big rock, and some trees far away, there was only water to be seen.

The tall old peepul tree groaned. Its long, winding roots clung tenaciously to the earth but the earth was softening, the stones were being washed away. The roots were rapidly losing their hold.

The crow must have known that something was wrong, because it kept flying up and circling the tree, reluctant to settle in it yet reluctant to fly away.

Sita's wet cotton dress clung to her thin body. The rain ran down from her long black hair. It poured from every leaf of the tree. The crow, too, was drenched and groggy.

The tree groaned and moved again.

There was a surge of mud from below. As the tree moved, it

tilted, swayed slowly forward, turned a little from side to side, dragging its roots along the ground. Then it slid into the main current of the river.

* * *

The branches swung her about, but Sita did not lose her grip. The water was very close now, and she was frightened. She could not see the extent of the flood or the width of the river. She could only see the immediate danger, the water surrounding her.

The crow kept flying around the tree. The bird was in a great rage. Its nest was still in the branches—but not for long.... The tree lurched and twisted slightly to one side, and the nest fell into the water. Sita saw the eggs go one by one.

The crow swooped low over the water, but there was nothing it could do. In a few moments the nest had disappeared.

The bird followed the tree for about fifty yards, perhaps hoping that something still remained in it. Then, flapping its wings, it rose high into the air and flew across the river until it was out of sight.

Sita was alone once more. But there was no time for feeling lonely. Everything was in motion—up and down and sideways and forwards. “Soon,” she thought, “the tree will turn right over and I’ll be in the water!”

In the distance she saw a flooded village, and people in flat-bottomed boats; but they were very far away.

Because of its great size, the tree did not move very swiftly on the river. Sometimes, when it passed into shallow water, it stopped, its roots catching in the rocks; but not for long: the river’s momentum soon swept it on.

At one place, where there was a bend in the river, the tree struck a sandbank and was still.

Sita felt very tired. Her arms were aching, and she was no longer upright. With the tree almost on its side, she had to cling tightly to her branch to avoid falling off. And still the rain came down.

Then Sita heard someone calling. Craning her neck to look upriver, she was able to make out a small boat coming towards her.

There was a boy in the boat. He brought the boat close to the

tree, and holding on to one of the branches to steady himself, gave his free hand to Sita.

She grasped his hand and slipped into the boat beside him. He placed his bare foot against the tree-trunk and pushed away.

The little boat moved swiftly down the river. The big tree was left far behind. Sita would never see it again.

* * *

She lay stretched out in the boat, too frightened to talk. The boy looked at her, but he did not say anything, he did not even smile. He lay on his two small oars, stroking smoothly, trying to keep from going into the middle of the river. He wasn't strong enough to get the boat right out of the swift current; but he kept trying.

"You live on the island," he said at last, resting on his oars and allowing the boat to drift a little, for he had reached a broader, more placid stretch of the river. "I have seen you sometimes. But where are the others?"

"My grandmother was sick," said Sita, "Grandfather took her to the hospital in Shahganj."

"Where have you come from?" she asked, for she had never seen the boy before.

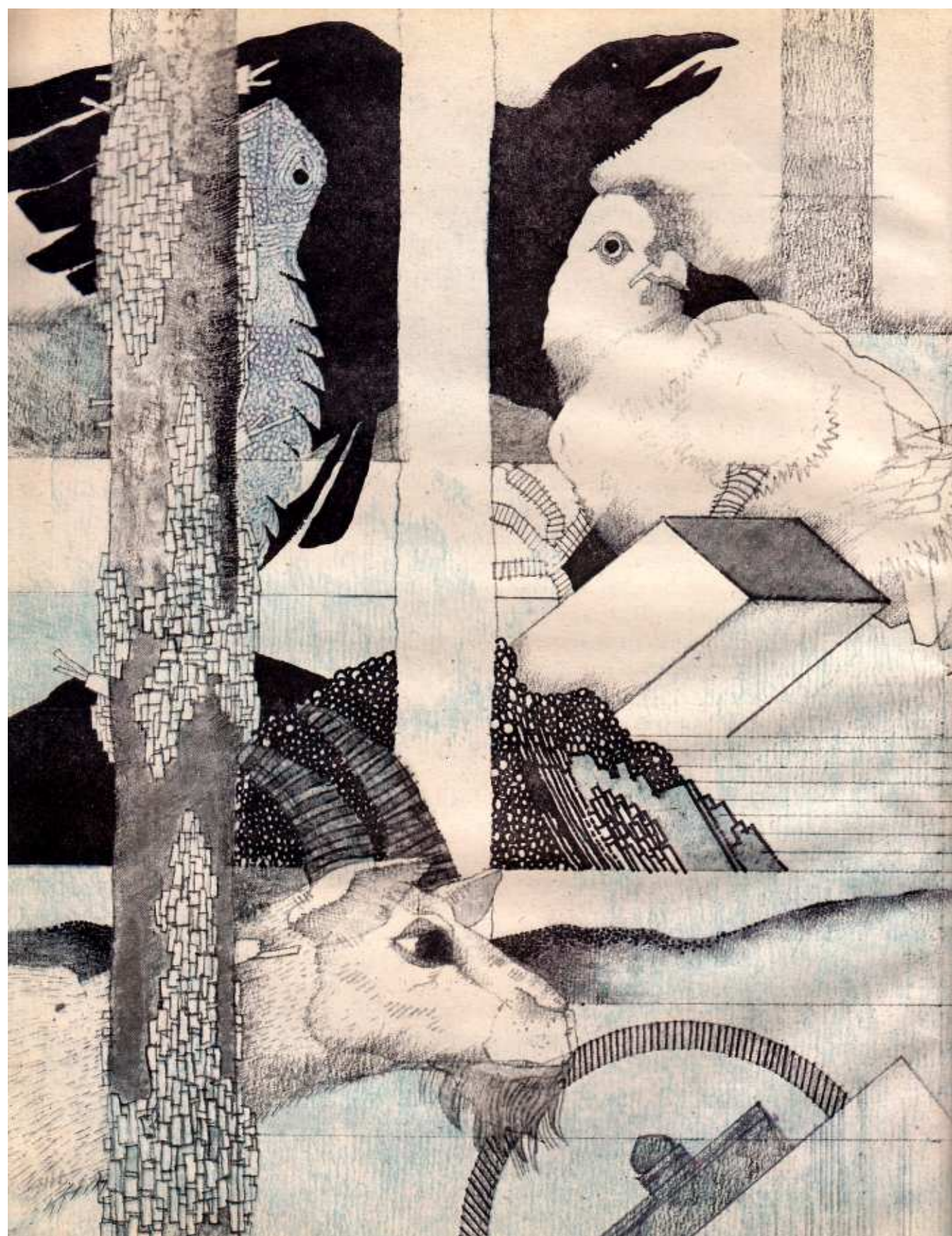
"From a village near the foothills. I was in my boat, trying to get across the river with the news that the village was flooded. But the current was too strong, I was swept down past your island. We cannot fight the river. we must go where it takes us."

He brought in one oar, and with his free hand he felt under the seat, where there was a small basket. He produced two mangoes, and gave one to Sita.

They bit deep into the ripe fleshy mangoes, using their teeth to tear the skin away. The sweet juice trickled down their chins. The flavour of the fruit was heavenly. Sita hadn't tasted a mango for over a year. For a few moments she forgot about the river—all that mattered was the mango!

The boat drifted, but not so swiftly now, for as they went further away from the foothills, the river lost much of its power and fury.

"My name is Krishan," said the boy. "My father has many





cows and buffaloes, but several have been lost in the flood."

"I suppose you go to school," said Sita.

"Yes, I am supposed to go to school. There is one not far from our village. Do you have to go to school?"

"No—there is too much work at home."

It was no use wishing she was at home—home wouldn't be there any more!

"I will try to reach the trees," said the boy. "We do not want to spend the night on the river...."

And so he pulled for the trees. After ten minutes of strenuous rowing, he reached a bend in the river and was able to escape the pull of the main current.

Soon they were in a forest, rowing between tall evergreens.

"We will tie the boat to one of these trees," said Krishan. "Then we can rest. Tomorrow we will find our way out of the forest."

He produced a length of rope from the bottom of the boat, tied one end to the boat's stern, and threw the other end over a stout branch which hung only a few feet above the water. The boat came to rest against the trunk of the tree.

That night the denizens of the forest were on the move. The animals had been flooded out of their holes, caves and lairs, and were looking for shelter and dry ground.

Sita and Krishan saw a huge python gliding over the water towards them. Sita was afraid that it might try to get into the boat; but it went past them, its head above water, its great length trailing behind, until it was lost in the shadows.

A big *sambhur* stag came thrashing through the water. He did not have to swim; he was so tall that his head and shoulders remained well above the water. His antlers were big and beautiful.

"There will be other animals," said Sita. "Perhaps a tiger. Should we climb into the tree?"

"We are quite safe in the boat," said Krishan. "Lie down and sleep, and I will keep watch."

Sita stretched herself out in the boat and closed her eyes, and the sound of the water lapping against the sides of the boat soon lulled her to sleep. She woke once, when a strange bird called overhead. She raised herself on one elbow; but Krishan was awake,

sitting in the prow, and he smiled reassuringly at her.

Krishan was asleep in the bottom of the boat. A leaf had fallen on his upturned face, but it had not woken him, it lay on his cheek as though it had grown there.

He woke at last—yawned, stretched his limbs, and sat up beside Sita.

"The water has not risen any further," he observed. "But I am hungry."

"So am I," said Sita.

"The last mangoes," he said, emptying the basket of its last two mangoes.

When they had finished eating, Krishan rowed the boat through the trees, and then for about an hour they were gliding through the flooded forest, under the dripping branches of rain-washed trees. Sometimes they had to use the oars to push away vines and branches. Sometimes submerged bushes hampered them. But they were out of the forest before noon.

In the distance they saw a village, built on high ground. The water became shallower as they took their boat over the flooded fields.

The people of the village were helpful and kind, and gave Sita and Krishan food and shelter. Sita was anxious to find her grandparents; and an old farmer, who had business in Shahganj, offered to take her with him. She was hoping that Krishan could accompany her, but the boy said he would wait in the village, where he knew others would soon be arriving, his own people among them.

"You will be all right now," he said. "You must find your grandfather as soon as possible. In two or three days the water will go down, and you will be able to return to the island."

"If the island is still there," said Sita.

As she climbed into the farmer's bullock-cart, Krishan handed her a flute.

"Keep it for me," he said. "I will come for it one day." And, when he saw her hesitate, he added, "It is a good flute!"

* * *

It was slow-going in the bullock-cart. The village roads had almost disappeared, and the wheels got stuck in the mud, and the

farmer and his grown-up son and Sita had to keep getting down to heave and push in order to free the big creaking wooden wheels. The bullocks were bespattered with mud, and Sita's legs were caked with it.

They were a day and a night in the bullock-cart before they reached Shahganj; and by that time, Sita, walking down the narrow bazar of the busy market-town, was hardly recognisable.

Grandfather did not recognise her. He was walking stiffly down the road, looking straight ahead, and would have walked right past the dusty, dishevelled girl if she had not charged straight at his thin, shaky legs and clasped him around the waist.

"Sita!" he cried, when he had recovered his balance and his wind. "But how are you here? What made you leave the island? How did you get off? I have been so worried—it has been bad these last two days...."

"Grandmother?" asked Sita.

Even as she spoke, she knew that Grandmother was no longer with them. The dazed look in the old man's eyes told her as much. She wanted to cry—not for her grandmother, who could suffer no more, but for Grandfather, who looked so helpless and bewildered. But she forced back her tears, and took his gnarled and trembling hand, and led him down the crowded street. And she knew, then, that it would be on her shoulder that he would lean in the years to come.

They returned to the island after a few days, when the river was no longer in spate. There was more rain, but the worst was over. Grandfather still had two of the goats; he had not found it necessary to sell more than one.

He couldn't trust his eyes when he saw that the peepul tree had disappeared from the island—the tree that had seemed as permanent as the rocks of the island, as much a part of their life as the river itself. He marvelled at Sita's escape.

"It was the tree that saved you," he said.

"And the boy," said Sita.

She thought about the boy, and wondered if she would ever see him again. But she did not think of him too often, because there was such a lot to be done.

For three nights they slept under a crude shelter made of gunny-bags. During the day she helped Grandfather rebuild the hut.

The trunk which she had packed so carefully had not been swept away, but the water had got into it, and the food and clothing had been spoilt. But Grandfather's hookah had not been harmed, and, in the evenings, after their work was over and they had eaten the light meal which Sita prepared, he would smoke with a little of his old contentment.

Sita planted a mango seed in the same spot where the peepul tree had stood. It would be many years before it grew into a big tree, but Sita liked to imagine herself sitting in its branches one day, feasting on mangoes!

Slowly the rains came to an end. In the villages, people were beginning to till the land again and sow new crops for the winter months. There were cattle fairs and wrestling matches. The days were warm and sultry. The water in the river was no longer muddy, and one evening Grandfather caught a huge *mahseer*, and Sita made it into a delicious curry.

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Grandfather sat outside the hut, smoking his hookah. Sita was at the far end of the island, spreading clothes on the rocks to dry.

There was a soft footfall behind her. She looked round, and there was Krishan, standing over her and smiling.

"I thought you wouldn't come," said Sita.

"There was much work in my village. Did you keep my flute?"

"Yes, but I cannot play it properly."

"I will teach you," said Krishan.

He sat down beside her, and they cooled their feet in the water, which was clear now, taking in the blue of the sky. You could see the sand and the pebbles of the river-bed.

"Sometimes the river is angry, sometimes it is kind," said Sita.

"We are part of the river," said Krishan.

It was a good river, deep and strong, beginning in the mountains and ending in the sea.

Along its banks, for hundreds of miles, lived millions of people, and Sita was only one small girl among them, and no one had ever heard of her, no one knew her—except for the old man, and the boy, and the river.

Adal-Badal : The Exchange

by Pannalal Patel

It was the hour of twilight on the day of the Holi festival. A group of village boys, gathered under a *neem* tree, were playing, throwing dust at one another.

Amrit and Isab came walking arm-in-arm and joined them. Both were wearing new clothes stitched that very day, identical in every respect: colour, size and material. The boys were in the same class, at the same school and lived in houses facing each other at the corner of the street. The boys' parents were farmers owning about the same size of holdings and occasionally had to borrow money from the moneylender to tide over difficult times. In short, the two boys had everything in common except that Amrit had both parents living and three brothers, whereas Isab had only his father.

The two boys came and sat on the pavement. Seeing them identically dressed, one of the boys asked, "Hey Amrit, Isab, have you changed your identities?"

This gave another boy a mischievous idea. "Why don't you two have a wrestling match? We can see whether you are also equal in strength or whether one is tougher than the other," he said.

The first boy thought this a good idea and added, "Yes, Amrit, Isab, let's see which of you can get the better of the other."

"Come on!" shouted another boy. "It's only for fun."

Isab looked at Amrit. "No," said Amrit firmly. "My mother will thrash me."

His fear was well founded. As he was leaving home, his mother warned him, "You made such a fuss to get new clothes! If you tear or dirty them, you know what is coming to you."

It's true that Amrit had bullied his parents. When he heard that Isab was getting a new shirt, he had insisted that he should get one exactly like Isab's or he would not go to school. His mother had tried to reason with him, "Son, Isab has to work on the farm;

his clothes are worn out. Yours are still as good as new."

"Who says so?" Amrit had cried, widening a tear in his shirt with his finger.

His mother tried another gambit. "Isab was given a thrashing by his father before he was given his new clothes. Would you also like a thrashing?"

Amrit refused to be put off. "Okay," he said defiantly. "Tie me up! Beat me! But you have to get me a shirt like Isab's."

"All right," replied his mother washing her hands of him. "Go and ask your father."

Amrit knew that if his mother had said no his father was not likely to agree. But he was not one to give up. He refused to go to school, refused to eat and refused to come home at night. Finally, his mother gave in and persuaded his father to buy him new clothes. She brought Amrit from Isab's father's cowshed where he had been hiding.

Having left home smartly dressed Amrit was loath to do anything that would spoil his clothes. In any case, he was most reluctant to wrestle with Isab.

Just then one of the rowdies of the gang put his arms around Amrit's neck and said, "Come on, let's have a wrestling match." He dragged Amrit on to the open ground.

Amrit tried to wriggle out of the boy's grasp and said, "Look Kalia. I do not want to wrestle. Leave me alone."

Kalia refused to let go and threw Amrit on the ground. The boys shouted in glee, "Amrit has lost, Kalia has won! Kalia has won! Hurrah, hurrah!"

Isab lost his temper. He took Kalia by the hand and said, "Come on. I will fight you."

Kalia hesitated. But the other boys egged him on. The two boys grappled with each other. Isab tripped Kalia and sent him sprawling on the ground. Kalia began to howl.

The boys realised that what had started as a joke had become a serious affair. Afraid that Kalia's parents might beat them they scattered and ran away in different directions.

Amrit and Isab also left the arena. They had hardly gone a few steps when Amrit's eyes fell on Isab's shirt. Its pocket and a six-inch strip were torn. They stopped dead in their tracks overcome





with fear. They examined the tears in the shirt. As if this was not enough, they heard Isab's father shouting from his house, "Where's Isab?"

The boys' hearts stopped beating. They knew they were going to have it. No sooner Isab's father saw his torn shirt, he would skin him alive. He had borrowed money from the moneylender, spent a lot of time choosing the cloth and having it stitched.

Again Isab's father shouted, "Who's crying? Where is Isab?"

Suddenly Amrit had a brain-wave. He dragged Isab to one side. "Come along with me," he said. As they entered the lane between the two houses, Amrit started unbuttoning his shirt. "Come on, take off your shirt. You wear mine," he ordered.

"What about you? What will you wear?" asked Isab.

"I'll wear your shirt," replied Amrit. "Hurry up before anyone sees us."

Isab began unbuttoning his shirt but could not follow what Amrit was getting at. "Exchange shirts? How will that help? Your father will thrash you."

"Of course, he'll thrash me. But I have a mother who'll protect me," replied Amrit.

Isab had often seen Amrit hide behind his mother when his father wanted to beat him. He had to take a slap or two from his mother, for sure! But what was a gentle slap from a mother compared to the father's heavy hand?

Isab hesitated. Just then he heard someone cough close by. The boys quickly exchanged shirts and came out of the lane and walked gingerly towards their homes.

Amrit's heart was pounding with fear. But he was in luck. It was Holi. And it was only natural that there should be some rough play. When she saw his torn shirt his mother only frowned, and forgave him. She took a needle and thread and mended the torn shirt.

The boys got over their fear and set off again arm-in-arm to see the Holi bonfire outside the village.

A boy who had noticed the exchange of shirts spoilt the fun by taunting them, "So you have interchanged, huh?"

Fearing that the boy had seen them exchange their shirts, Amrit and Isab tried to slink away. By then other boys also knew

what had happened and set up a chant, "*Adal-Badal, Adal-Badal.*"

The two boys tried to slip away but the gang followed them yelling, "*Adal-Badal,*" "*Adal-Badal.*" Fearing that the story might reach their fathers' ears, the two friends ran towards their homes.

Isab's father was sitting on a cot in the front yard, smoking his hookah. He called out to the boys. "Why are you running away from your friends? Come and sit near me," he ordered.

His gentle tone worried the boys. "It is just as we feared. He knows the truth and is only pretending to be kind," they thought.

Isab's father, a Pathan, picked up ten-year-old Amrit in his arms. He called out, "Vahali Bhabhi, from today your son Amrit is mine."

Vahali Bhabhi came out of her house. She laughed and said, "Hasan Bhai, you can't even look after one son, how will you cope with two?"

"As from today, Vahali Bhabhi, I am ready to bring up twenty-one if they are like Amrit," said Hasan in a voice choked with emotion.

The Pathan cleared his throat and told Vahali Bhabhi that he had seen the two boys go into the lane. "I decided to see what the boys were up to," he said.

The other women of the neighbourhood also gathered round to hear what the Pathan was saying.

What he had to say didn't take long. He told them how the boys had exchanged their shirts and said, "Isab asked Amrit, 'What if your father beats you?' And do you know what your Amrit replied? He said, 'But then I have a mother'."

With tears in his eyes, the Pathan added, "How true! Amrit's reply has changed me. He has taught me what is truly worthwhile."

The women were moved by the tale of Amrit and Isab's affection for each other.

Just then the boys who were returning from the Holi bonfire surrounded Amrit and Isab. They chanted, "Amrit-Isab, Adal-Badal, Bhai Adal-Badal."

This time Amrit and Isab were not upset. On the contrary they were happy to be called Adal-Badal.

The story of Adal-Badal spread through the village. It reached the village Headman who announced: "From today we will call

Amrit Adal and Isab Badal.”

The boys were very happy. Soon not only the village but even the skies resounded with the cries, “Amrit-Isab, Adal-Badal, Adal-Badal!”

Translated from Gujarati by S. Sundar

The Boy with a Catapult

by Bhisham Sahni

Our class at school had an odd assortment of boys. There was Harbans Lal who, when asked a difficult question, would take a sip out of his inkpot because he believed it sharpened his wits. If the teacher boxed his ears he would yell, "Help! Murder!" so loudly that teachers and boys from other classes would come running to see what had happened. This caused much embarrassment to the teacher. If the teacher tried to cane him, he would put his arms round him and implore, "Forgive me, Your Majesty! You are like Akbar the Great. You are Emperor Ashoka. You are my father, my grandfather, my great grandfather."

This made the boys giggle and put the teacher out of countenance. This Harbans Lal would catch frogs and tell us, "If you smear your hands with frog fat you will not feel the teacher's cane."

But the oddest fellow in the class was Bodh Raj. We were all afraid of him. If he pinched anyone's arm, the arm would swell up as if from a snake-bite. He was utterly callous. He would catch a wasp with his bare fingers, pull out its sting, tie a thread round it and fly it like a kite. He would pounce on a butterfly sitting on a flower and crush it between his fingers; or else stick a pin through it and put it in his notebook.

It was said that if a scorpion stung Bodh Raj the scorpion would fall dead; Bodh Raj's blood was believed to be so full of venom that even snake-bite had no effect on him. He always had a catapult in his hand and was an excellent shot. His favourite targets were birds. He would stand under a tree, take aim and the next moment bird cries would rend the air and the fluff of feathers float down. Or else he would climb up a tree, take away the eggs and completely destroy the nest.

He was vindictive and took pleasure in hurting others. All

the boys were scared of him. Even his mother called him a *rakshasa*—demon. His pockets bulged with strange things—a live parrot, an assortment of eggs, or a prickly hedgehog.

If Bodh Raj quarrelled with anyone, he would charge at him head on like a bull, or viciously kick and bite him. After school, we would return home, but Bodh Raj would be off on his wanderings.

He always had a fund of strange tales to tell. One day he said, "There is a *goh* living in our house. Do you know what a *goh* is?"

"No. What is a *goh*?"

"It's a kind of reptile, about a foot long. It has many feet and claws."

We shuddered.

"We have a *goh* living under our staircase at home," he continued. "Once it catches hold of anything, it won't loosen its grip come what may."

We shuddered again.

"Thieves keep *gohs*. They use them to scale high walls. They tie a rope on the *goh's* hind legs and fling it up. As soon as the *goh* touches the wall, it clamps firmly on it, so firmly that even ten men cannot dislodge it. The thieves then pull themselves up the wall with the help of the rope."

"When does the *goh* loosen its hold?"

"After the thieves have climbed over they give it some milk. It immediately relaxes its hold."

Such were the stories Bodh Raj would relate.

My father was given a promotion in his job and we moved into a large bungalow. It was an old style bungalow on the outskirts of the city. It had brick floors, high walls, a slanting roof and a garden full of trees and shrubs. Though comfortable it seemed rather empty and big, and being far from the city my friends seldom came to visit me.

The only exception was Bodh Raj. He found it good hunting ground. The trees had many nests, monkeys roamed about, and under the bushes lived a pair of mongooses. Behind the house there was a big room, where my mother stored our extra luggage. This room had become a haunt of pigeons. You could hear their cooing all day. Near the broken glass of the ventilator there was also a

myna's nest. The floor of the room was littered with feathers, bird droppings, broken eggs, and bits of straw from the nests.

Once, Bodh Raj brought a hedgehog with him. The sight of the black mouth and sharp bristles gave me quite a turn. My mother did not approve of my friendship with Bodh Raj, but she realised that I was lonely and needed company. My mother called him a devil and often told him not to torment birds.

One day my mother said to me, "If your friend is so fond of destroying nests tell him to clean our store-room. The birds have made it very filthy."

I protested, "You said it's cruel to destroy nests."

"I didn't suggest he should kill the birds. He can remove the nests without harming them."

The next time Bodh Raj came I took him to the godown. It was dark and smelly as though we had entered an animal's lair.

I confess I was somewhat apprehensive. What if Bodh Raj acted true to form and destroyed the nests, pulled out the birds' feathers and broke their eggs. I couldn't understand why my mother who discouraged our friendship should have asked me to get Bodh Raj to clear the godown.

Bodh Raj had brought his catapult. He carefully studied the position of the nests under the roof. The two sides of the roof sloped downward with a long supporting beam across. At one end of the beam, near the ventilator, was a myna's nest. I could see bits of cottonwool and rag hanging out. Some pigeons strutted up and down the beam cooing to one another.

"The myna's little ones are up there," said Bodh Raj aiming with his catapult.

I noticed two tiny yellow beaks peeping out of the nest.

"Look!" Bodh Raj exclaimed, "This is a Ganga myna. It isn't usually found in these areas. The parents must have got separated from their flock and come here."

"Where are the parents?" I asked.

"Must have gone in search of food. They should be back soon." Bodh Raj raised his catapult.

I wanted to stop him but before I could open my mouth there was a whizzing sound, and then a loud clang as the pebble hit the corrugated iron-sheet on the roof.





The tiny beaks vanished. The cooing and tittering ceased. It seemed as if all the birds had been frightened into silence.

Bodh Raj let fly another pebble. This time it struck the rafter. Bodh Raj was proud of his aim; he had missed his target twice and was very angry with himself. When the chicks peeped over the rim of the nest, Bodh Raj had a third try. This time the pebble hit the side of the nest, a few straws and bits of cottonwool fell—but the nest was not dislodged.

Bodh Raj lifted his catapult again. Suddenly a large shadow flitted across the room, blocking the light from the ventilator. Startled we looked up. Gazing down at us menacingly was a large kite with its wings outstretched.

"This must be the kite's nest," I said.

"No, how can a kite have its nest here? A kite always makes its nest in a tree. This is a myna's nest."

The chicks began fluttering their wings and shrieking loudly. We held our breath. What would the kite do?

The kite left the ventilator and perched on the rafter. It had folded back its wings. It shook its scraggy neck, and peered to the right, and the left.

The birds' frightened cries filled the air.

"The kite has been coming here every day," said Bodh Raj.

I realised why broken wings, straw and bits of bird flesh littered the floor. The kite must have ravaged the nest often.

Bodh Raj had not taken his eyes off the kite which was slowly edging its way towards the nest. The cries rose to a crescendo.

I was a bundle of nerves. What difference did it make whether the kite or Bodh Raj killed the myna's young? If the kite had not come Bodh Raj would certainly have made short work of the nest.

Bodh Raj raised his catapult and aimed at the kite.

"Don't hit the kite. It will attack you," I shouted. But Bodh Raj paid no attention. The pebble missed the kite and hit the ceiling. The kite spread its wings wide and peered down.

"Let's get out of here," I said, frightened.

"The kite will eat up the little ones." This sounded rather strange coming from him.

Bodh Raj aimed again. The kite left the rafter and spreading its wings, flew in a semi-circle and alighted on the beam. The chicks

continued to scream.

Bodh Raj handed me the catapult and some pebbles from his pocket.

“Aim at the kite. Go on hitting it. Don’t let it sit down,” he instructed. Then he ran and pulled up a table standing against the wall to the middle of the room.

I didn’t know how to use the catapult. I tried once, but the kite had left the beam and flown to another.

Bodh Raj brought the table right under the myna’s nest. Then he picked up a broken chair and placed it on the table. He climbed on the chair, gently lifted the nest and slowly stepped down.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said, and ran towards the door. I followed.

We went into the garage. It had only one door and a small window in the back wall. A beam ran across its width.

“The kite can’t get in here,” he said, and climbing on to a box, placed the nest on the beam.

The myna’s young had quietened down. Standing on the box Bodh Raj had his first peep into the nest. I thought that he would pick them both up and put them in his pocket, as he usually did. But after looking at them for a long time he said, “Bring some water, the chicks are thirsty. We’ll put it, drop by drop, into their mouths.”

I brought a glass of water. Both the chicks, beaks open, were panting. Bodh Raj fed them with drops of water. He told me not to touch them, nor did he touch them himself.

“How will their parents know they are here?” I asked.

“They will look for them.”

We stayed in the garage for a long time. Bodh Raj discussed plans to close the ventilator, so that the kite would not be able to enter the godown again. That evening he talked of nothing else.

When Bodh Raj came the next day, he had neither catapult nor pebbles. He carried a bag of seeds. We fed the myna’s young and spent hours watching their antics.

Translated from Hindi by Bhisham Sahni

Rahula

by Triveni

When Rahula first came to our house he was a tiny, little fellow. My grandmother, who was very fussy about cleanliness and had strong notions of pollution, was very upset when she heard about his coming. As Father was poring over the newspaper she went to him and said, "Listen, child." Father knew Grandma would treat him to a long admonition about Rahula. So he folded up the paper and resigned himself to her lecture. I stood beside them, nibbling at a guava.

"What's going on in this house?" she demanded. "How can brahmins have a dog in their home? It's a dirty animal. And we must be scrupulously clean to be able to perform our rites and rituals."

"A dog is a very clever animal. If we teach him he will learn quickly. It all depends on how we train him."

"Rubbish! How can you teach a wretched cur? How can you be sure how he will behave at a particular moment? What if he smells rice or some vegetable cooking and runs into our kitchen? What a lot of trouble and expense we will have to incur to purify the kitchen!"

"I told you, Mother, we can take care and see that he doesn't get into the kitchen. Beat him once or twice and he will know where he can and where he cannot go."

"That may be. But what if he jumps on me when I go to throw leaf-plates after the meal is over? I will have to go to bathe in the holy Ganga to get purified."

"If we start his training when he is very young he is sure to learn. I shall see he doesn't come in your way."

Grandma was very displeased. "You seem to have made up your mind," she said.

"Mother, I don't want to upset you but thefts are on the

increase everywhere. One dog is equal to ten watchmen. A dog is true to his salt."

"Do as you please," said Grandma as she walked away. My father turned to me. "What do you say, Leelu?" he asked.

"I think it is nice to have a dog. I have always wanted to have one," I said.

One day Chenna bought a dog of a good breed which he hugged to his chest. He called out to me.

"Look what I've brought! Isn't he lovely?" The poor thing was frightened and shrank from us. He was a jet black colour. So black you would not be able to see him in the dark. He did not have a single white hair on his body. He was a glossy, silky black with ears too big for his tiny body; they hung down on either side of his bright green frightened eyes. I was filled with affection.

"Chenna, he is lovely! Look, his face is like the glow-worm. I'll take him. Come, little girl," I said stretching my hands.

"Not a little girl, a little boy."

"Oh! How old is he?"

"Only twenty days old. He howled when I brought him away from his mother. You must feed him only with milk for another month. How do you like his coat?"

"All the darkness of the moonless night," I replied as I took the pup in my arms. I called out to my mother.

"What's all the noise about?" asked my mother as she and Grandma came out of the kitchen. The moment Grandma saw the pup in my arms she stepped back and cried, "Shame on you! See the girl! She is carrying the pup as if it was her baby! She is old enough to be married but she hasn't grown up!"

I wanted to tease Grandma. I kissed the pup.

"Oh God! What more are these sinful eyes condemned to see!" exclaimed Grandma as she turned away.

But Mother was full of admiration for the pup. "He is lovely! What will you call him?" At the time I happened to be reading a play 'Yashodhara' and my mind was full of Yashodhara and Rahula. So I blurted out the name uppermost in my mind, "Rahula."

Mother thought for a moment and agreed, "Yes, it is a good name."

That night Rahula slept very little. He had been deprived of





the warmth of his mother's body and her love. I had made a bed of two gunny bags for him, in a corner. But Rahula kept whining all through the night; many times I got up to fondle him. As long as I had him in my arms Rahula was quiet. But the moment I switched off the light he began to whimper. No one in the house slept a wink that night. Grandma was very angry. "The wretched thing doesn't allow me to sleep. How can I stay in this house and let it ruin the last days of my life?"

I listened to Grandma's grumblings. Finally I protested. "Grandma, let it be. The little thing is missing his mother. Didn't you tell me that you were eleven when you were married? And that when you went to your husband's house you couldn't sleep the whole night and kept crying? Rahula is also thinking of his mother and keeps weeping."

Grandma's annoyance was tinged with affection. "You are a clever girl! You remember what I told you long ago and now you quote it against me!"

Rahula took a week to settle down. Gradually he stopped howling and got rid of his fear. I put together some rags to make a soft warm bed for him. I got a big glass plate for his food and bought a leather collar for him. Once a week Chenna gave him a bath.

Rahula and I became firm friends. As soon as I came home from school I took him out for a stroll. I wouldn't allow anyone else to feed him. I gave him the rice and milk myself. I couldn't give him his bath because the moment he saw water he would run away. One day when I tried to bathe him, he knocked me off my feet and I fell into a puddle. He stood by the tank wagging his tail. That was the last time I tried to give him a bath.

It was difficult to make Rahula understand Grandma's notions of cleanliness and pollution. The moment he saw any of us he would jump up and place his forepaws on the person; it was only after he had been stroked, petted and spoken to that he let the person alone. Whenever Grandma stepped out someone had to hold back Rahula or see that he was chained. Once Grandma believing that Rahula was chained came out; Rahula as was his habit, jumped up to greet her. Grandma let out a wild scream and ran back into the house.

"After all the rituals I have performed! I have to be polluted

by this accursed creature and have to purify myself," she said. Chenna gave Rahula a thrashing. Grandma chanted *mantras*, fasted and gave alms to beggars to cleanse herself of the pollution. From that day Rahula would not go near Grandma. When he saw her he wagged his tail from a distance. Grandma appreciated that and said, "He's a clever fellow. Since the day Chenna beat him, he has never tried to come near me." When Grandma prepared delicacies which needed to be dried in the sun, Rahula kept guard over them and wouldn't allow any crows to get near. Thus he won Grandma over. And once when a thief tried to break in, it was Rahula who woke up everyone with his barking. Thereafter Grandma was full of praise for him. She decided that in their previous lives Rahula must have dedicated himself to the service of her family and God would not be pleased if we neglected him. Grandma began to share her supper with Rahula.

Within a year Rahula grew to a monstrous size and became as strong as a bear. He was fed on milk, rice and bread, and with meat which Chenna cooked for him once a week. When he stood on his hind legs he was as tall as I. He was so watchful that not a blade of grass moved without his noticing it. He was as fierce towards strangers as he was affectionate and gentle to those he knew. Rahula was both my friend and my bodyguard. When he was with me I could go out at night without fear. He accompanied Grandma and me to the temple and kept guard over our slippers which we left at the entrance. He would even eat the banana which Grandma gave him.

My friend Malathi's father was transferred to Bangalore. Before she left she gave me a pup from her dog's litter. The pup was only ten days old. We named her Rani. She was a spotless white as if carved out of moonlight. Her eyes were a light blue colour. What a contrast between the two dogs! Rahula was something of an untamed savage; Rani was sedate and ladylike. Rahula was like the turbulent sea; Rani like a placid stream flowing gently across a plain.

I was sure Rahula would be happy to have a companion. I carried Rani to him and said, "Look at your Rani." Rahula snarled. Rani shrank away from him. I stroked Rahula and chided him, "Stupid, this is no way to behave towards a Rani!" I poured milk

into Rahula's plate and placed it before Rani. She lapped it up. Rahula glowered at her and growled angrily.

I called out to Chenna to give Rahula his feed. Chenna mixed rice with milk in a coconut shell and put it before Rahula. This was the first time that anyone besides me had given Rahula his feed. He refused to look at the food placed before him but kept watching Rani eat out of his bowl. When Rani had finished I emptied the rice and milk in the coconut shell into his plate and put it before him. He ate it up without fuss.

As darkness fell Rani began to shiver. I felt sorry for her and put her in Rahula's bed. I made another one for Rahula but he refused to lie on it and sulked on the floor.

Rani had to be taught to adjust herself to her new home. She had to be trained to observe Grandma's rules of cleanliness and not to go to the kitchen. So I spent a good deal of time with her. Chenna looked after Rahula. And Rahula was old enough to look after himself.

Rani pined for Rahula's friendship. She tried in a hundred ways to win his affection but Rahula hated the very sight of her. The moment she tried to snuggle up to him he snapped at her.

One evening I was sitting on a stone bench, reading a book. Rani was playing at chasing a ball. I had tied Rahula to a nearby tree. He watched Rani at play. She was trying to take the ball in her mouth. The ball would slip and roll away. Rani would run after it and try to catch it between her teeth. The ball rolled close to Rahula. Hesitantly Rani ventured to retrieve the ball. Before she could get it, Rahula growled fiercely and pounced on her. Rani screamed for help. I threw away my book and ran to her rescue. Rahula had dug his sharp teeth into Rani's neck. I kicked Rahula and made him release Rani and took her in my arms. She was trembling with fear. Rahula was snarling and hopping mad. Saliva poured out of his mouth. Even I was somewhat frightened of him. Poor little Rani was badly mauled; her snow-white coat had spots of blood on it. I was furious with Rahula and wanted to teach him a lesson. I gave him a severe thrashing with a walking-stick.

I began to take better care of Rani.

One Sunday afternoon I chained Rahula to a tree and came indoors to have a nap. I had hardly put my head on the pillow when

I heard Rani scream. I ran out. What I saw made my stomach turn. Rahula had Rani between his teeth and was savaging her, dashing her on the ground like a *dhobi* washing clothes on a slab of stone. Rani's cries grew fainter and fainter. Rahula's eyes were aflame with jealousy, wrath and vengeance. I was too terrified to go near him.

I called out to Chenna, Mother and Grandma. They came out running. "Chenna, save Rani. Rahula will kill her," I screamed. Chenna ran up to Rahula and gave him a hard kick. Rahula rolled over and let go of Rani. She was covered with blood. Rahula had ripped open her belly. Rani whimpered in agony and then lay still.

Blood dripped from Rahula's tongue. When I turned to him he wagged his tail and watched the still body of Rani. He looked pleased with himself.

"Chenna, who set Rahula free? I had chained him."

Chenna answered guiltily, "He had to be bathed. I unchained him and came in for soap. Before I could go back he had killed the poor thing."

I was furious with Rahula. I stepped forward to thrash him.

"Don't go near him, he is mad. He may bite you," screamed Mother.

"Mad!" I was petrified.

"Of course! Otherwise he would not have killed Rani."

"He can't be mad, Mother. This is not the season," I protested.

Grandma interrupted, "What do you know of these things? Is madness tied to a season? Don't go near him."

My anger vanished. I could see no signs of madness in Rahula.

"Chenna, bring poison for Rahula. We will mix it with his rice. It is dangerous to have a mad dog in a home with children."

"No, Mother," I pleaded. "Don't have Rahula poisoned." I began to cry.

It was of no avail. My tears did not soften anyone's heart towards Rahula.

The next morning Chenna went to Rahula with the poisoned rice. Rahula wagged his tail and jumped with joy. Chenna was afraid to go near him. He put down the plate at some distance and pushed it forward. Rahula did not even glance at the food; he tried to come to me. Mother noticed that he would not touch the rice and said,

“Leela, you put the plate before him.”

How could I give poison to someone I had brought up like my own child! I refused.

Grandma turned to Chenna. “Push the plate towards him. He will eat if he is hungry.” Chenna pushed the plate nearer the dog. Rahula had not eaten the night before and was hungry. He looked sideways at me, wagged his tail and began to gobble up the food. I could bear no more. I went to my room and shut the door.

I haven’t brought another dog to my home.

Translated from Kannada by L. S. Seshagiri Rao

Sundar and Spotted Tail

by Karoor Nilkanth Pillai

Twelve-year-old Sundar looked after the village cows. He was given rice and curry for his labours.

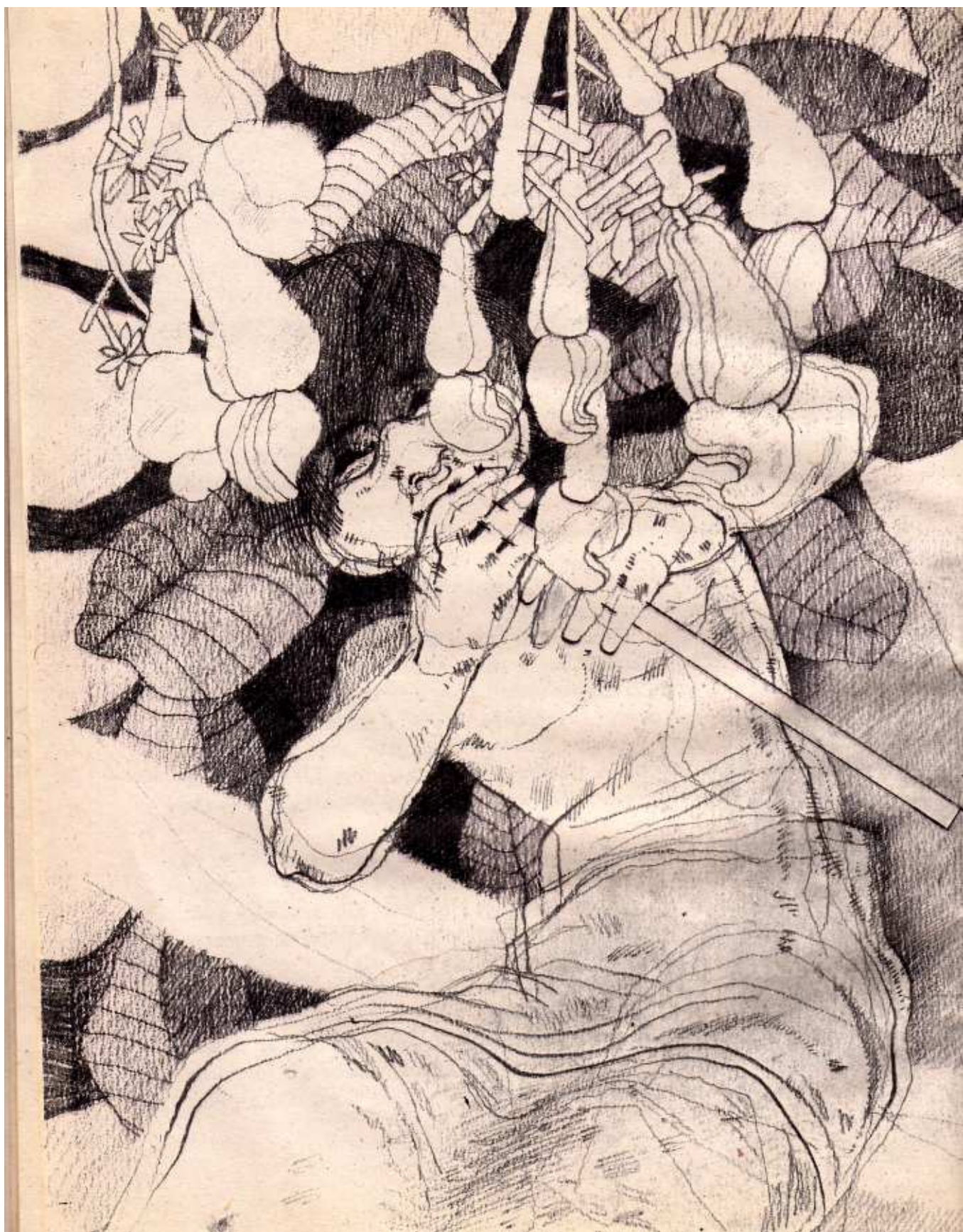
Early one summer morning he took out three cows for grazing. He had named them 'Curly Horned', 'Dark Eyed', and 'Spotted Tail'. He had his meal packed in his bag which he slung across his shoulders. In the bag he also carried his penknife and pipe. With a stick he goaded the cows towards the pasture land nearly a mile away.

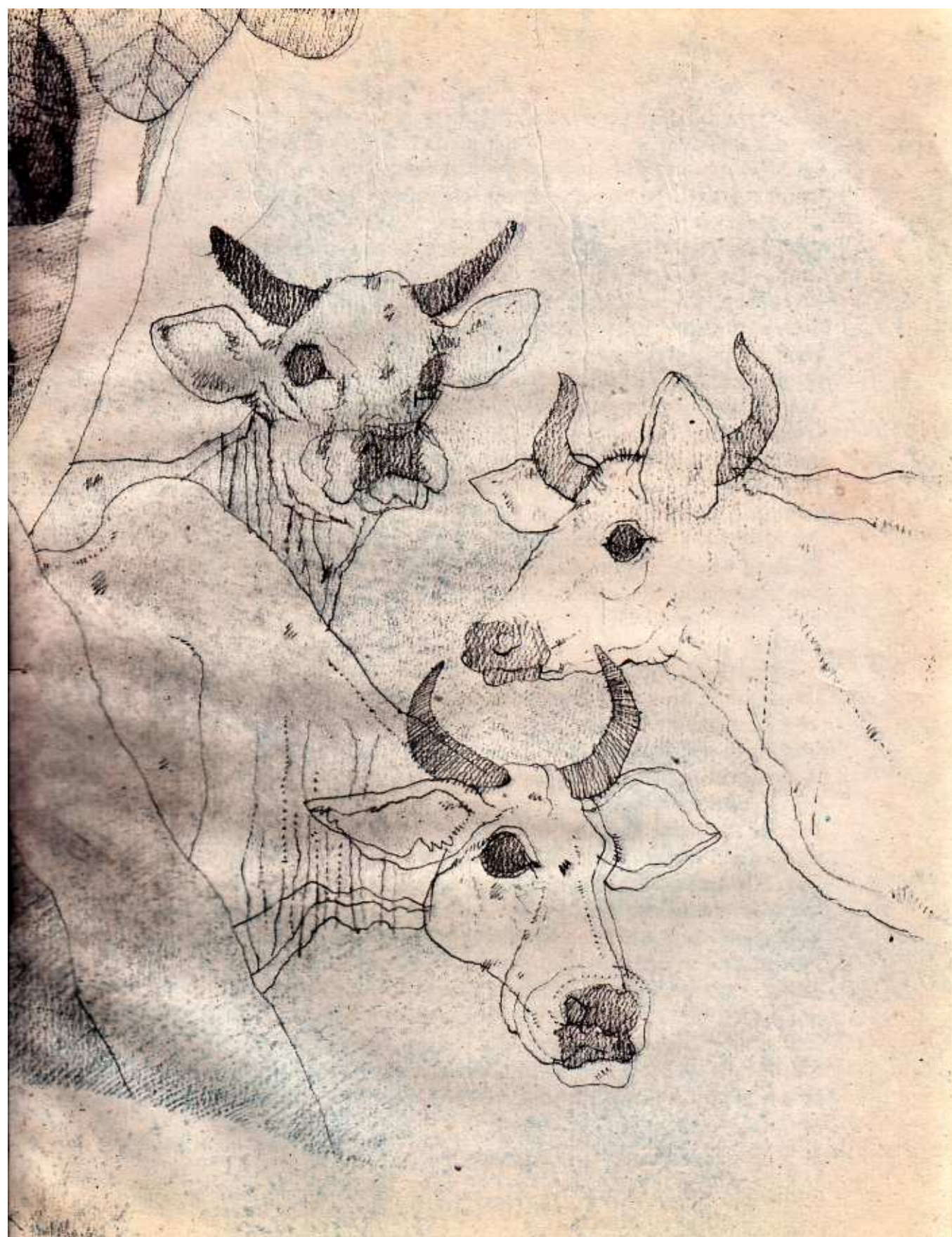
The pasture land was a vast area overgrown with a variety of trees and bushes. At the time we are talking of, there had been a drought, everything had dried up and there was very little for the cattle, just a few leaves to nibble at.

It was not often that Sundar was asked to take out the cattle. If it rained, the cattle stayed in their sheds. If the harvest was good there was no need for his services because the cattle could feed themselves on the paddy stubble. It was only during the summer months when there was very little for the cattle that Sundar was asked to take them out to pasture. This was seldom for more than a fortnight. But in these two weeks he really got attached to the cattle.

Alongside the grazing ground was a lush forest full of trees of all varieties which gave shelter to all kinds of animals—jackals, monkeys, porcupines, hares, wild pigs and deer. Occasionally even elephants could be seen. But the forest was a government preserve and no grazing was allowed there.

That morning Sundar allowed the cows to go into the forbidden territory. He perched himself on a cashew tree and helped himself to a few kernels. He imitated bird calls and made flower wreaths for the cows. When his cows strayed towards the forest he played his pipe to draw them back. He patted their flanks and





admonished them gently against losing themselves in the jungle. Sundar cut a slender reed and inserted a nut in its hollow tube. When he blew into one end the nut shot out like a bullet from a gun. He used it against lizards and squirrels. He clambered over trees, peering into bird nests and made leaf-caps by pinning them with thorns. Sometimes he would dance the Garuda dance he had seen at the temple festival.

A stream ran between the pasture land and the forest. There was little water in it—not enough to bathe the cattle and barely enough for them to slake their thirst and him to wash down his meal of rice and tapioca stew.

In the afternoon the cows lay in the shade chewing the cud while Sundar reclined in the shadow of a rock. A monkey came near and he shot a pebble through his reed gun and frightened it away. He felt very drowsy so he stretched himself out on a carpet of leaves and made up for the sleep he had lost at night.

Sundar's deep slumber was broken by a pack of jackals howling near him. He woke up with a start. Night had fallen and it was pitch dark. He could not see his three cows; probably the jackals had frightened them away; or had they been dismembered by the jackals? Had the jackals bitten off their ears and udders—and left them to die? Jackals often had rabies. Dogs bitten by jackals became mad—the same must be true of cows. It was said that anyone who touched a mad cow would become mad too. Or had they run into the forest and been devoured by a tiger? How would he face his elders? Would the jackals attack him?

Sundar was terrified but he kept his cool. He quietly slipped over to the other side of the rock and with his hands and feet felt the ground till he was able to find three stones which he put in the bag. He crept up to the top of the rock and flung the largest stone in the direction of the jackals. The stone found its mark for he heard a thud and a jackal howl in agony. He followed the first shot with two more through his reed gun, and again found his mark. The jackals scurried away and began to howl at a distance.

Sundar slipped down the rock. He had walked no more than five or six paces when his feet were caught in the roots of a tree. He felt its bole with his hands and discovered that a sturdy creeper was twined round the tree. He hauled himself up on to a branch and felt

safe. Suddenly the Night Jar (known to the locals as the Death Bird) called, "Burn him down! Burn him down!" This terrified him all the more. Then he reassured himself that God was there to help him. A crescent moon shed its faint light and he was able to see better. He espied what looked like the form of a monkey recumbent against the bole of the tree. He moved stealthily along the branches till he was exactly above the monkey, then dropped his sackful of stones on its head. The monkey screamed and ran. Its companions perched on other branches also screamed and scampered down the tree. That was Sundar's chance to get away. He slid down the tree, cut a long stick with his penknife and used it to clear his way through the reeds. He made his way back to the rock, clambered up it and lay down for a short respite. By now the crescent moon had gone down and only a few stars twinkled in the sky.

Sundar's thoughts were on his cows. The poor creatures must be lost in the dark. They were so helpless. Their terror and suffering would be far greater than his. He had played his pipe but the jackal's howling had drowned its notes.

Hunger and thirst were gnawing at him. If only he could pluck some fruit, but he could hardly see in the dark.

Then he saw a light. Could it be humans or evil spirits? Sundar broke into a cold sweat.

The light was very faint. A sudden sound broke the silence. Sundar pricked up his ears. It was not the sound of trees being felled.

Mustering up all his courage Sundar once again slid down the rock on all fours and went towards the light.

He saw four or five men skinning a dead animal. It was his spot-tailed cow who had delivered a calf only four months earlier. Sundar stole behind a tree to watch the goings on. The men had a bottle full of glow-worms as their lamp. He noticed the severed head of the cow and realised that it was not his favourite Spotted Tail but an old white bull. He sighed with relief. The discovery also made him bold. All he had to do was to steal the bottle full of glow-worms. The thieves had covered it with sacking and only exposed a side when they needed it. While they were engaged in their nefarious work, Sundar quietly picked up the bottle covered with gunny sack and went back to the tree.

He heard one of the gang shout, "A little light here."

Another turned to get the bottle he had put on the stone. It was gone. Where had the bottle disappeared? They began to argue and quarrel.

"I'm sure I left it here."

"Look carefully! It must be there."

"I'm sure I left it on the stone."

"Someone has surely seen us. We will be caught red-handed. Let's escape."

They decided to get whatever they could of the meat and beat a hasty retreat. They began to hack frantically at the carcass. Suddenly they froze as the notes of a reed pipe floated across the dark. The men dropped their knives and ran to climb up a tree.

The notes of the pipe fell on the ears of a jackal. It raised its head and began to howl. Others in the pack joined in a chorus. They smelt meat and came scampering to the carcass and fell upon it. From the tree-top the gang of thieves helplessly and sorrowfully watched the jackals devour the bull they had butchered.

Sundar had by now recovered his composure and his eyes had got accustomed to seeing in the dark. He started calling to his cows and playing on his reed pipe.

The birds and beasts of the jungle appeared agitated. Birds tittered and chirped, little animals scurried past him, and the anxious shrill cry of deer filled the air. But there was no sign of his cows.

Fear lent wings to his feet and he began to run. Thorns and bramble caught at his arms and legs, scratching and bruising him. Suddenly he tripped over a tree-root and fell headlong. Fortunately his bottle of glow-worms did not break. By its faint light he saw that below the knee he had a deep cut which was bleeding profusely. To stop the bleeding he tied the sack's string above the wound. He was in great pain and could not stand up.

Sundar was filled with terror at the thought that the smell of his blood would attract some wild animal and he would be eaten alive. Or else ants would gather and make a meal of him! What horror!

He cleansed his bruises with the leaves of a herbal plant and with his last ounce of strength called out to his favourite Spotted Tail. But his shout was no more than a faint whisper. Utterly

exhausted Sundar fell asleep where he was.

* * *

What had happened was very simple. The cows had grazed their fill; chewed the cud and then bellowed to Sundar to tell him it was time to go home. Sundar slept through their bellowing and when Spotted Tail licked his leg, rewarded her by a resounding kick. The cows went back to the village without Sundar. They were tied up in their byres.

When Sundar had not returned home even after nightfall his father went looking for him. When he learned that the cows were back he decided that Sundar must have gone to see the festival at the temple, and returned home.

The next morning Spotted Tail would not let anyone milk her. She bucked and kicked anyone who came near her. The villagers thought she was sick. Everyone offered their diagnoses:

“She has been bitten by a snake.”

“She must have eaten some venomous plant in the forest.”

The mistress of the house finally ordered Spotted Tail to be fed only with salt in her gruel instead of her usual fare of oil-cakes and bran-water. She was not to be milked and her calf also kept hungry and the two tied separately in the byre.

A little later she went to the cowshed with the gruel—salted rice water. Spotted Tail had vanished.

The mistress was very upset and began to berate everyone. “Didn’t I tell you not to let the cow out of the byre? Why did that boy Sundar take her out against my orders?”

They noticed the broken end of the rope tied to the stake. “Look, she’s broken loose. She couldn’t have gone very far.”

They looked for Spotted Tail everywhere. There was no sign of the cow or the cowherd, Sundar. Sundar’s father and Spotted Tail’s mistress set out towards the forest to look for them. Others joined them in their search.

Spotted Tail found her way to the spot where she had left Sundar sleeping the night before. He was no longer there. Spotted Tail began to search frantically. She came upon Sundar’s bag, now dirty and torn and at last, after further searching, upon Sundar himself. He was bruised all over but fast asleep. The cow let out a

deep bellow and began licking the boy all over his body: she licked away the ants and flies that had clustered over the boy's wounds. It was strange that the cow's udders became heavy and began to ooze with milk. She lay down exposing her wet udders close to Sundar's face so he could reach them. The boy took the cow's udders in his mouth exactly as would a calf and began to suck. Slowly strength came back to his limbs. He rested his head on the cow's dewlaps and nestled against her body. That is how the search party found Spotted Tail and Sundar, the cow and the cowherd.

Translated from Malayalam

After all, You're Faster Fenay!

by B. R. Bhagwat

Nandu Nawathe lived at Worli—he was a true Bombayite. Banesh (alias Faster) Fenay, on the other hand, was a student at Poona's Vidya Bhavan, and his maxim was 'The whole world's my home'. Nandu thought it odd that he should meet the wandering Banesh almost at his doorstep; though the strangest consequence of that chance encounter was on Faster Fenay—and that too because of Nandu.

I said 'almost' because Banesh hadn't really been invited to Nandu's home. After all, they weren't even acquainted. Of course, Nandu knew of Faster Fenay, as others did, because of his bravery and impulsive deeds of daring. And Banesh had heard of Nandu Nawathe's incredible ability to spin a yarn. Story-teller Nandu could create a whole world out of nothing.

These two young braves first met on the roof-terrace of a big splendid building near Nandu's house.

A large crowd of children had assembled. The famous Khoka Medicine Company had organised a painting competition. They had been trying to popularise their Jock Cough Drops with all manner of publicity tie-ins. And what they had tied up now, at the height of their efforts, were lots and lots of balloons!

The swaying balloons looked like lotuses floating on a mountain lake. There were hundreds of them—both rubber and plastic. In front of them intent on painting words and pictures sat scores of children. Not really 'sat'; the children had to stand to demonstrate their artistic skill—and on a canvas or rather plastic—that bobbed and dipped. There were numerous rows of boys and girls. One row faced west, the next east, so that it wasn't easy to copy from one's neighbour.

The challenge before the children was to paint on a balloon an attractive picture with a catchy slogan in bright red, using not more

than fifteen words. The slogan, of course, had to be in praise of Jock Cough Drops. The judges would select the best among the painted balloons, award the winner and the prize-picture and slogan would be copied on to a huge balloon to be launched into the sky.

All Bombay would see the advertisement—both of Jock Cough Drops and the winner's skill!

The Khoka Company's huge, imposing balloon was in the middle of the terrace, straining at its ropes.

* * *

Banesh (alias Faster) Fenay had come to Matunga in Bombay to spend a holiday with his aunt. He had seen the contest advertised in the paper and wanted to take part.

"I know I'm no Dnyaneshwar," he told his aunt. "I wouldn't be able to write thousands of lines of verse. But it doesn't take a great writer to put ten words together!"

"Don't I know it! After all, you're Faster Fenay!" replied his aunt. "But your sentence must be really good. It must be a winner! Don't just ..." she broke off, in a fit of coughing. Jock Cough Drops had found their first customer.

"Stop!" Banesh stared at his aunt his mouth open, still shaping the word that had shot out.

"What's the matter?" she asked. Cough! Cough!

"I've a brain-wave! My picture will be a frog stuck in someone's throat. He's shouting, 'Croak! Croak!' The next line is 'When coughs won't stop!' Then I'll say, 'Best to pop in...a Jock Cough Drop!' See? Not even fifteen words!"

"Don't be silly!" said his aunt, coughing away as she went out of the room.

* * *

The contest was on. Nandu Nawathe was also present.

Though Nandu may have been a good fellow at heart, he had this compulsive habit of telling tall stories. Once started he would get so caught up in his yarn, that at times he even believed it himself!

But sooner or later his tales were exposed and then Nandu was ready to die of embarrassment.

Meanwhile Faster Fenay added to his exploits. It infuriated

Nandu when he heard of them.

"That Faster Fenay's grown too big for his boots!" spluttered Nandu. "As if there's no one in the world as brave as him! It's just that he gets opportunities to show off, and I don't. Wherever Faster Fenay goes there seem to be disasters waiting—and on either side of the road!"

"To welcome him?" giggled his friend.

"I don't come across them!"

"You make them up instead! You always pretend you've had great adventures!" his friend needled him. Nandu said angrily, "Oh, that's enough!" and fell silent.

But there was no doubt that he was envious of Faster Fenay. He hoped that one day he would be able to take him down a peg or two.

And now Faster Fenay was at the contest. He had no inkling that he would meet him there. He had painted a picture of an imaginary gentleman, a Mr. Oak, on his balloon, and was writing his slogan beneath it in red paint.

He got as far as, "When Mr. Oak...started to choke..." and then his inspiration ran out. What next? Spinning a yarn wouldn't help here. This was real life. Brush in mouth, brow wrinkled, Nandu looked around for inspiration. (Looking at others' balloons, that is.) Suddenly he saw that famous checked shirt, curly hair, large eyes! And what was more those eyes were fixed on him.

"My—my—my! Who is this creature? No one but the famous Faster Fenay himself!" scoffed Nandu. But he scoffed so loud that Banesh heard him.

"Hello! Who are you?" he asked.

"They call me Nandu Nawathe," replied Nandu promptly, introducing himself. He thought that was enough of an introduction. Faster Fenay wasn't the only conceited one around!

"Glad to meet you, Miss Nandini Nawathe," said Faster Fenay.

"Miss! What do you mean?" growled Nandu, clenching his fists.

"Oh, dear! You mean you're not Miss—you're Master Nandu?" said Banesh, grinning. "How was I to know? After all, these days lots of girls wear bell-bottoms and cut their hair short. But boys never wear lipstick!"

"Lipstick!" exclaimed Nandu, growing pale. He rubbed a

finger over his lips, and felt the handiwork of the paintbrush! His lips must be bright red with paint!

Many of the neighbouring children had been watching. Some burst out laughing; others stifled their giggles and turned back to their work.

Nandu felt like sinking through the floor with shame. To add to his embarrassment a supervisor arrived on the scene. The supervisor rebuked everyone and then turned with special rage on Nandu.

"Are you taking part in the contest or in a drama makeup!" he growled.

"Sorry, Sir!" muttered Nandu, wiping his lips on his sleeve. "I'll fix that Faster Fenay!" he muttered furiously to himself.

Everyone finished painting their balloons, and pasted labels with their names and addresses on them. The supervisors took the balloons into a room, leaving the children alone.

The contestants gathered excitedly round the company's huge balloon. They walked around it, gazing at it admiringly.

A strong wind picked up making the king-sized blue-and-white striped wonder bob and dip in the air. Only two words were printed on it: 'Khoka' and 'Jock'. Everyone was looking up and no one noticed what was happening at the foot of the balloon. Banesh, too, was looking up.

The ropes of the balloons had been attached to two or three brass rings. Only one child noticed them. Nandu Nawathe bent down and quickly loosened the knot in the thick rope.

"How thick the rope is!" said Faster Fenay.

"Thick and strong. It's made of nylon," Nandu informed him. He was standing right by Banesh. "Touch it and see."

Banesh had no sooner caught hold of the rope, than Nandu loosened the knot. The rope slipped out and a strong gust of wind made the balloon shoot up skywards. Faster Fenay's hand was caught in one of the brass rings, and he was pulled, so fast, he couldn't get it out. In his bewilderment he grabbed the rope with the other hand too. He tried to pull the balloon down with all his strength but its upward buoyancy was too much for the matchstick hero to overcome. The balloon rose high into the sky—and clinging to it went Faster Fenay.

The children could hardly believe their eyes when they saw Faster Fenay's sudden ascent with the balloon. Had they not seen it with their own eyes and only heard of it from Nandu they would have thought it one of his tall stories.

Nandu's mouth was dry with fear. However angry he was with Banesh, he had not intended to cast him into the sky. He had only wanted to get him in trouble when the balloon flew off because Banesh touched the brass rings! It wasn't, of course, a nice thing to have planned. He would have apologised to Banesh later. Nandu enjoyed seeing people in trouble. But this was going too far.

"Good heavens, he's flown off!"

"Pull him down! Pull him back!"

"Grab the rope! Police! Police! Fire Brigade!"

There was absolute chaos. Everyone was rushing around terror-stricken, issuing orders and instructions to everyone else.

The line of cars streaming along the Worli Sea Face suddenly came to a stop as if the traffic lights had turned red. Car horns started blowing like conch shells in a hundred temples.

The balloon carrying Faster Fenay rose higher and higher. A westerly wind blew it off its vertical course towards the west.

It was frightening enough to make any boy's blood run cold. Faster Fenay had faced many terrifying situations but never one like this—which took him into the empty expanse of the blue heavens.

He had once parachuted down into the NEFA battlefield. But he had done that of his own free will, and with the reassuring thought that he would float down towards Mother Earth. Now he had no such reassurance. God alone knew where the balloon was going to take him—and, how far, for how long—and where it was going to drop him.

Sweat poured off Faster Fenay's body. When he looked down, his head spun. Faster Fenay was terrified... He was no comic-strip Superman, he was only a frightened little kid.

He felt a numbing sensation in his hands. One hand gripped the rope, the other was caught in the brass ring. He knew that he mustn't let go for that would be the end! He would be flattened like a pancake if he hit the ground. "Oh God! Help me!" he cried.

He suddenly recalled that balloons have a plug to let out the air slowly so that the basket attached can sink down to the earth.





But this wasn't a balloon like that. No plug of any sort. How could he let the air out of it?

He had his catapult, and a few peppermints. But how was he to pull out the catapult from his pocket and use it, with both hands caught in the ropes?

The balloon drifted over the city roof-tops to the sea. There was the Haji Ali shrine and ships and foam flecked waves.

If he fell in the sea he might be hurt but at least he would survive. He wished someone down below would fire a gun and burst the balloon.

Faster Fenay thought he was going to faint.

Banesh tightly gripped the brass ring with one hand, with the other he tried to undo his belt. It wasn't easy, but at last he managed it.

Banesh held the end of the belt firmly and cracked it, whack! whack! whack! like a whip.

He hit the belt-buckle hard against the balloon, but had to strike one, two, three, four, five, six times before the pin of the buckle pierced the plastic.

A hole ripped the side of the balloon, and the air rushed out with a loud whoosh.

Slowly, but surely, the balloon started to come down. In the fishing boats below, the fishermen's eyes were not fixed on the fish in the sea but were anxiously turned upwards on the unfortunate boy in the sky. What would happen to him? Could they help?

No. How could they? The sea was their kingdom, not the sky.

But they made space for the balloon to fall and quickly stretched out a fishing-net, flat and taut. It was the only hope for the boy.

The balloon fell right into it. The net had got its catch.

* * *

Where am I?

Cough! Cough! Cough! "You're at home," replied his aunt. "He said there's no reason to be frightened."

'He' was his uncle, the doctor. His uncle was a well-known doctor in Bombay.

"You didn't hurt yourself, did you, Banesh?"

"No. But I feel sick just to think about it. But who's that crying, Aunty? I can hear someone sobbing."

"It's your friend."

"Which one — Nandu? Nandu Nawathe? And what's the matter with *you*?"

"Banesh, I'm sorry! I really am! It was all my fault!"

"Your fault?"

In a few words Nandu told the story of what he had done. He said, "I'm so bad, so wicked, such an ass, say you forgive me, Faster Fenay! I won't get the prize, anyway. But even if I did, I wouldn't take it. I swear I wouldn't!"

Banesh sat up and stared at Nandu wide-eyed.

Just then, his uncle came in. "Bravo, Faster Fenay," he said. "So you're conscious. Do you know, if you hadn't fallen when you did, the Air Force was going to rescue you! There had been phone calls all around to arrange it. And you know what? There was a phone call just now from the Khoka Company. They have announced a special prize for you. They've never had so much publicity for Jock Cough Drops!"

"By rights the prize should not go to me but to Nandu Nawathe!" Nandu's eyes filled with tears, and Banesh's sparkled with mischief.

Translated from Marathi by Priya Adharkar

The Seven Steps to the Heavens

by S. K. Acharya

One morning as I picked up the newspaper the following words leapt at me:

“Hello, young folks! Do you dream of becoming spacemen?”

I was about to jump up in excitement when my eyes lingered on the printed words. It was, of course, an ‘ad’!

I read on:

“The Samanta Chandrasekhar Space Research Station, Bombay-1 wants spacemen! Young men wanting to become astronauts may apply...”

“Samanta Chandrasekhar? India’s great astronomer! Wasn’t he the scientist who had scanned the heavens with a bamboo pipe and foretold everything about the stars as accurately as a modern scientist with the most powerful telescope?”

I nodded my head vigorously and looked for a pen and paper.

And that morning I dropped a letter to Bombay into the post-box which was nailed to the trunk of a big mango tree standing in the college campus.

At the time I was a college student, but, more important, I was a member of the local flying-club and had even been given a license to fly small aircraft. The familiar blue sky no longer held any charm for me. I wanted to soar to the heavens. But, alas an aircraft is not a rocket. One needs a rocket, a spaceship to hurl oneself beyond the earth’s atmosphere into the dark unknown called space.

I was dreaming of rockets when my eyes had fallen upon the ‘ad’ in the newspaper.

I left for Bombay as soon as I was summoned.

My heart sank when I saw the queue of candidates for the job. They had come from the four corners of the country. My heart sank further when I shook hands with them. They all appeared to be veritable giants-body-builders, wrestlers, heavy-weight champions!

letters and understood their message clearly. There was food for me. I drank the milk.

The second time I got up to pee. I discovered a pot meant for the purpose.

I don't know exactly when the Ghoul-Box opened and the Doc appeared. The outside light and sounds made me suddenly realise I was back on earth and I cried out with joy, "I have certainly been away from the earth for a thousand years!"

But the Doc announced repressively, "Only forty-eight hours! A good beginning, though..."

The next time the Doc not only gave me up to the ghoul but put Satan along. In Box No. 2 Satan had a long arm to which the Doc tied me. I fell flat on a wide berth-like beam fixed to the wheel of the Devil. The wheel spun at breathtaking speed, driving the beam, like a windmill, in circles. It was like tying a man, by the waist, with a piece of long, strong rope and whirling him into the air until he cried out for mercy!

Before the Doc asked Satan to hurl me up, however, he taught me a trick.

"Look, here is a switch!" he said. "If you press it, the light will switch off then switch on again, automatically. As long as you feel safe on the arm of Satan and can bear the merry-go-round, keep pressing the switch. It will tell us you want more speed, more fun! If the light doesn't go off we will assume that you are through...that's all!"

The Doc's voice died away and somewhere a machine began humming. Suddenly I felt something jump up towards my heart. It could only be Satan himself! Next, I felt my heart being squeezed. Blood rushed up to my head, blood that appeared to have turned into molten lead—heavy and hot! Then I thought an elephant was really sitting on my chest.

I had borne the most excruciating pain and torture but I was still pressing the switch in my hand. I had lost all count of time and place.

The Satan's wheel came to a halt at last. The Doc peeped in.

"Hello," he croaked, "are you still there?"

He added, "You were going at seventy thousand miles per hour...in a straight line, of course!"

I was remembering my guru who had taught me the *pranayam* when the Doc led me up to the next hurdle—the Third Box.

The next box was named Jatu Griha—the house of lac. I gave a start when I heard the name. I could immediately imagine what was going to happen to me there. In the Epics the five Pandavas were once put in a house made of lac, which was set ablaze by their wicked cousins the Kauravas. I awaited a similar fate when the Doc pushed me into the box and slammed the door shut.

My fears proved well-founded. The box started getting hotter and hotter. But I had to stay still—no fidgeting!

Waves of heat beat furiously at my face. Beads of sweat ran down me as if I had just emerged from a shower. Sitting as serenely as possible I imagined that I was an astronaut whose spaceship was returning from a long flight. It was re-entering the earth's atmosphere, its nose bumping and rubbing against the air. Now, the nose was ablaze due to the intense heat caused by the friction. And suddenly I felt tongues of fire licking my face!

At last I heard the Doc's voice, "Only 103° Fahrenheit! Not much! Get ready for the next test."

The Doc thrust me into the next box called Nada Griha—the house of sound.

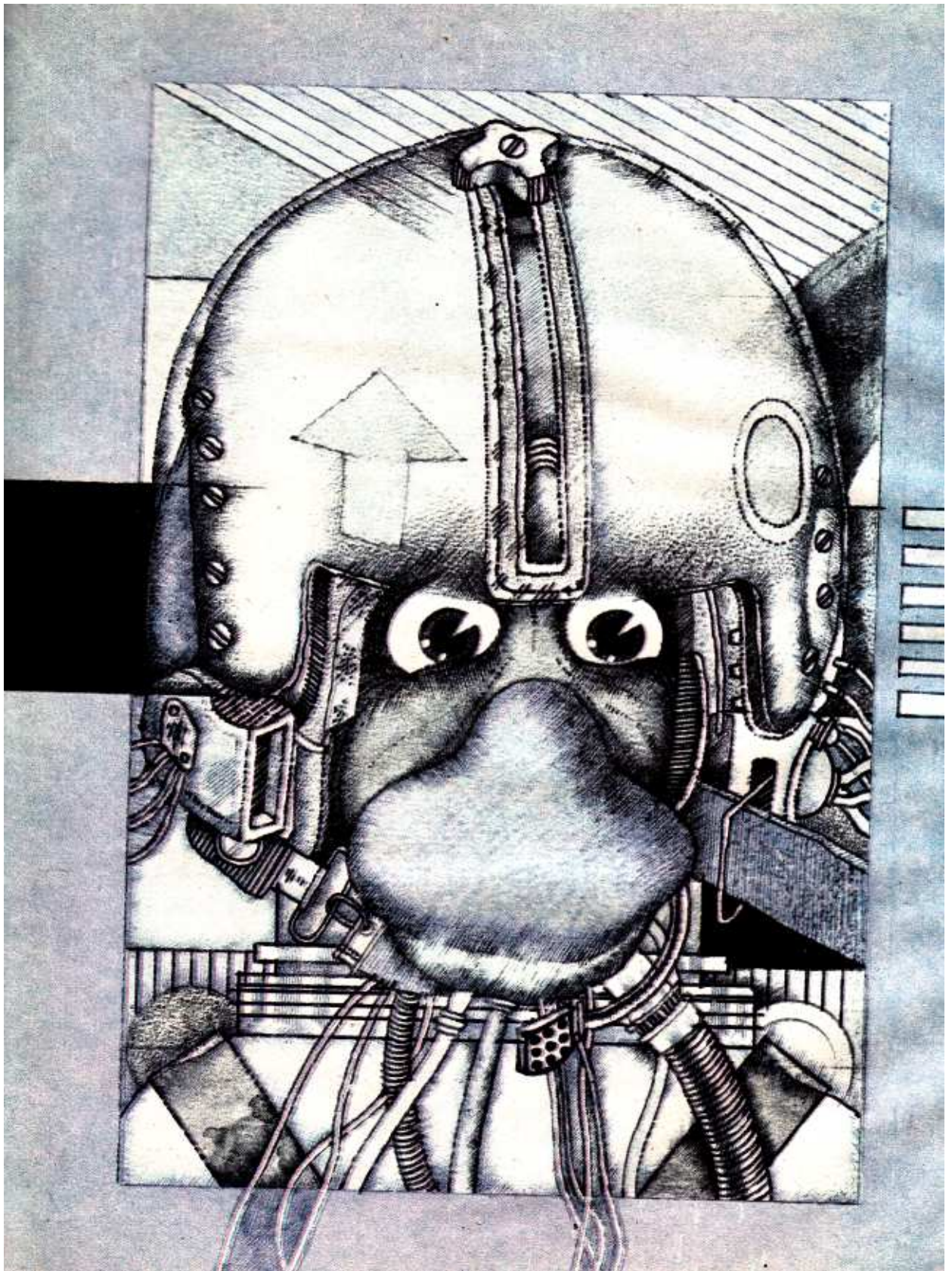
Never in my life had I heard such maddening noises—screams, whimpers, bangs—everything at once! It sounded like a thousand train-engines rushing past, whistles screeching in long blasts—the songs of the devil.

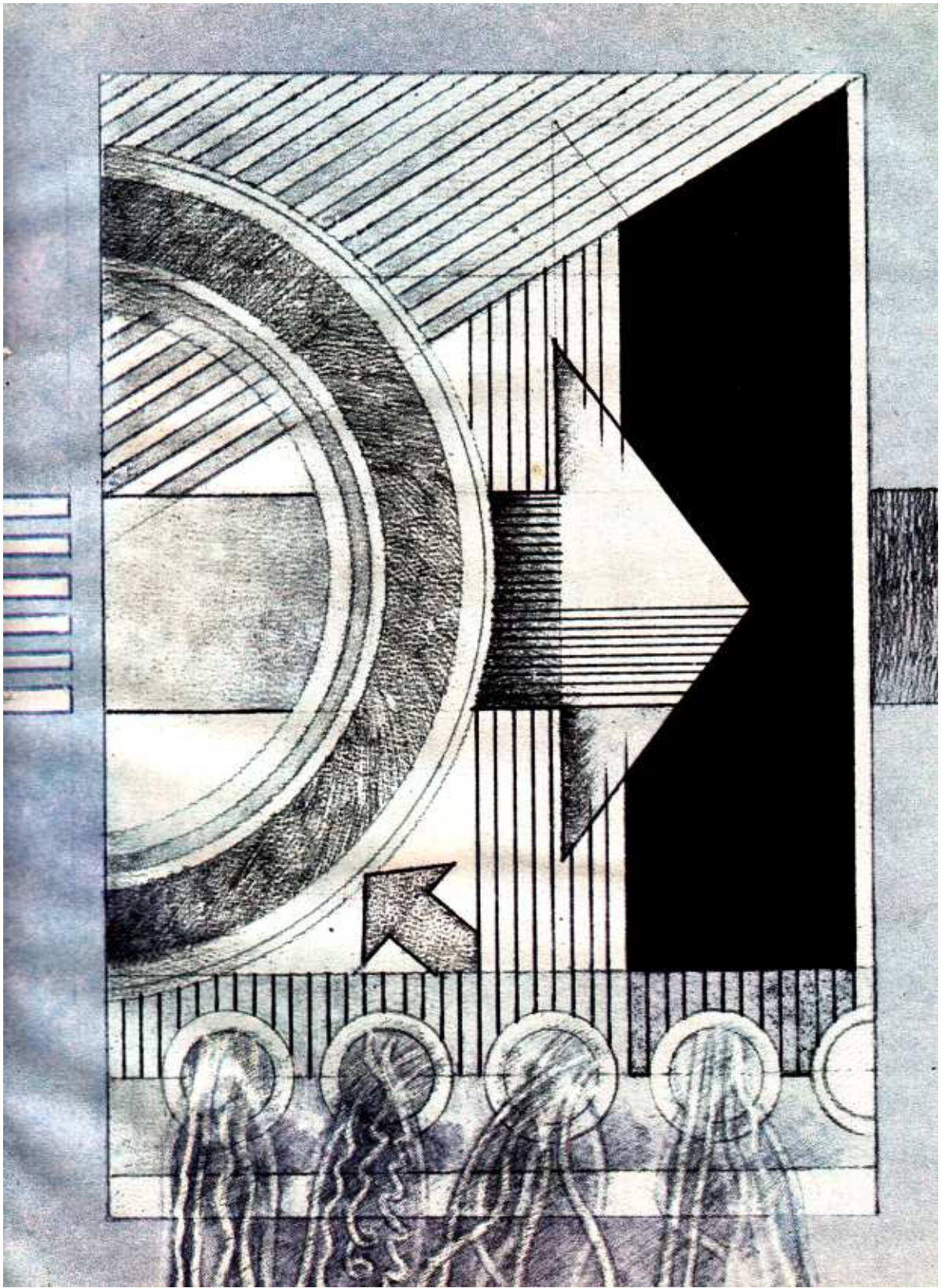
The kind Doc had of course put plugs into my ears, before pushing me in. But, despite these, the noise hammered at me mercilessly. I began to tremble. I felt my hair becoming red hot like the wires in an electric heater. The volume of the sound kept increasing till I thought I was in a rocket that had just been fired from a launching pad.

I did not notice the Doc when he entered my box. "Are you ready for the next step?" he asked.

I got up slowly. I had been sitting on my chair like a *rishi* meditating in the midst of a fire.

My next two trials, were in two still stranger boxes. The fifth box the Doc named, the Dance-Box! Immediately on entering, I was thrown off my feet. I had barely stood up when I was jerked off the





floor again. Then the box started spinning, round and round, occasionally turning somersaults! As the box danced, my body danced along with it. Finally, it slowed down. All the same, I planted my feet firmly on the ground. My head did not reel and I remained clear-headed despite everything. I had to always keep my head up like a spaceman otherwise had I been piloting a spaceship and lost my sense of direction, I could have turned the spaceship on the wrong course.

The next box was still stranger. The moment I entered, it sucked out all my body's weight. That's why the Doc named it the Box of Weightlessness!

It was a very odd experience. A moment later, I felt sick. Nevertheless I imagined I was in a spaceship. In space, man has to live in a weightless world. There, his body becomes a no-body!

The box opened. The Doc found me sitting in my *pranayam* position.

Only the seventh and last step to the heavens remained. Very difficult, but like being actually in space.

The Doc dressed me up in a spacesuit and mask. I must have looked strange, as strange as spacemen look in photographs.

The Doc put me in an oxygen tent and ordered, "Breathe in deeply, you'll need oxygen for this!"

Then, he slung a bag on to my back, fidgeted with some tubes and screws and said, "Now, get in and let's see the height to which you can soar in the airless space!"

I entered the dreaded box which I knew didn't have a cubic centimetre of air I could breathe.

The next second, I heard the humming. A vacuum pump had begun slowly sucking out the air from my box. My spacesuit began to get inflated. I felt suffocated. Actually the inflated spacesuit was protecting my body!

Meanwhile through my mask, I noticed two things. I saw a clock-like dial with a hand pointing to some figures. As I watched the hand moved—from something like ten thousand to twenty! Suddenly it jerked up to thirty, rising steeply.

The clock-hand wasn't indicating time, it was showing height.

Then my eyes, behind their mask, alighted on another funny object beside my seat. It looked as innocuous as a tumbler full of

water. The clock-hand continued moving steadily up the dial. Suddenly to my amazement the water in the tumbler began to boil. Then it began to evaporate and turn into clouds of steam.

I checked the clock. The hand was about to pass sixty thousand.

Was I really at sixty thousand feet above sea-level?

But my box wasn't even a foot above the ground. It was entirely the work of the vacuum pump, which had all the while been humming its song into my ears. My spacesuit indicated the degree of vacuum around me. In that vacuum it was small wonder that the water had turned into steam. After all, water cannot retain its liquid form in such a rarefied atmosphere.

The hand moved to seventy-five! In other words it was as if I was seventy-five thousand feet above sea-level! The very thought made me dizzy.

Suddenly I had a mischievous idea. I thought I would have some fun. I took off my right hand glove. But I was filled with terror when I saw what happened.

My hand swelled up large as a pumpkin! It seemed that like the water in the glass, my blood was trying to burst out of my skin and turn into vapour!

The Doc must have seen what was happening. With a hissing sound air rushed into my box. The vacuum pump fell silent. My spacesuit collapsed. My hand returned to normal. It had been saved. My life too had been saved.

The Doc ticked me off soundly when I was finally free. I took the scolding good-humouredly and then asked, "Do you know an Indian who went up to the heavens without a spacesuit?"

The Doc stared at me. "Yudhisthira! The eldest of the Pandavas!" I said and puffed out my chest with pride.

At these words the Doc's eyes lit up and winking at me kindly he said, "Well done! Very well done, my boy! You have been selected—like Yudhisthira you have passed the tests."

You may be happy to know that of the hundred candidates only three were finally chosen, and there were no giants among them.

"What happened to the giants," I enquired.

The Doc snorted, "We don't need giants! We look for ordinary young men like you."

Yes, I am an ordinary man, a very ordinary man. But, when I returned home and related the whole story to my guru he smiled and said, "It's nothing new, my boy! Know your body, mind and soul well. The world is tired of ordinary men. It needs more and more supermen."

Translated from Oriya by S. K. Acharya

Bum Bahadur

by Gurbaksh Singh

Matadin, who was Bum Bahadur's mahout, complained to the prince that the elephant was getting more and more wayward day by day. Under the doctor's orders he had been separated from his mate, who had been taken ill. But every evening if his mate was not taken for an outing with him, Bum Bahadur raised hell, bellowing and trumpeting for all he was worth. And if his mate was allowed to accompany him he tormented her. He refused to step out unless he had his trunk on her back. If Matadin remonstrated with Bum Bahadur he showed his anger in no uncertain manner.

"Don't worry, Matadin," said the prince to reassure the mahout. "Our Bum Bahadur loves to show himself off and hasn't had an opportunity to do so for some time. Next Wednesday, when I bring my bride to her new home, you put on all the trappings on Bum Bahadur and bring him to the railway station. We shall ride back to our palace on him."

Bum was not only a brave elephant as his name signified but had great dignity, a quality the prince greatly admired. At every state function and for every procession, the Maharajah took good care that Bum Bahadur was the centre of attraction. When fully caparisoned his manners were perfect. He behaved better than the best trained soldier on parade. But the same Bum Bahadur could be an absolute menace in the stable. Being gifted with an uncanny insight into human character, the slightest short-coming or act of dishonesty on the part of the stable-keeper put him totally out of temper.

Sometimes the servants were heard remarking, "Bum is quite a decent fellow, you know! But ever since the mahout has taken to stealing some of his fodder, Bum has had a grouse against him. Earlier Bum used to enjoy the reputation of being the finest of elephants."

The prince was returning from Udaipur with his newly wedded bride. The railway station wore a festive look. There were long rows of cars on the road. The cavalry, in their smart uniforms, sat upright on their Arabian steeds. And there stood Bum Bahadur in all his caparisoned glory. A stretch of shining brocade covered his rump. Tiny golden bells tinkled on the golden *howdah*. Even his tusks had been plated with gold. And on his back sat Matadin, very self-conscious of the height from which he surveyed the crowds below him.

A loud cheer went up as the prince and his Maharani climbed up the *howdah*. Bum Bahadur raised his trunk in salute. The procession started. Bum walked with such majesty that even Matadin, who was always finding fault with him, was impressed. Thus, swaying gently from side to side with infinite grace, Bum Bahadur deposited the royal pair he carried on his back at the portals of the palace.

Before introducing his bride to the other guests, the prince spoke to his elephant, "Bum Bahadur this is your new Maharani. You have perhaps been awaiting her even more eagerly than I." Bum Bahadur lifted his trunk and made his obeisance to the Maharani.

The lovely Maharani was the picture of love and affection. She was almost as tall as the prince. She had a broad forehead, full lips, and eyes which were at once large, black and sparkling; she seemed to speak with her eyes as much as see with them. On whomsoever her gaze fell, he was utterly bewitched. They were like the plectrum whose slightest touch made a well-tuned sitar burst into melody.

Bum Bahadur raised his trunk as a salute to beauty.

"Bum is not only my elephant, he is also my friend;" remarked the prince. "We were born on the same day."

The Maharani acknowledged Bum Bahadur's salute by folding her hands. Bum Bahadur touched them lightly with the tip of his trunk—and then like a disciplined soldier, stood at attention with his eyes fixed on the Maharani.

The prince sensed the emotion that was welling up in Bum's heart. "Our Bum has the body of an elephant but the soul of a lover. He has a very discerning eye," whispered the prince, with a mischievous glance at the Maharani, "especially for pretty faces."

The Maharani turned her eyes towards the prince and then at Bum. She read the same message of love in the eyes of both of them and felt at the top of the world.

For several days the prince was engrossed in marriage festivities and failed to make his weekly visit to the elephant stables. Meanwhile Bum Bahadur's resentment against his mahout mounted higher and higher. He was irked by the mahout's orders. He began to lose weight because he was getting less to eat than what he was accustomed to getting.

Finding an opportune moment, one day Matadin again complained to the prince about Bum Bahadur's increasing wilfulness and suggested that he should be packed off to the zoo. In his place a young elephant from the zoo should be given the necessary training to discharge the role of a royal elephant.

"No, there is nothing wrong with Bum," snapped the prince emphatically. "Only I have been remiss in my attention to him. So long as Bum is alive, no one will take his place."

That night the prince told the Maharani of the many instances of Bum's fidelity and regretted that his preoccupation with state affairs had made him neglect his friend. He requested the Maharani to go to the stable at least once in a week to enquire after Bum.

The Maharani agreed readily. The very next day, she had ten seers of *laddoos* made of the finest gramflour and went to the elephant stables. For Bum it was like the sun suddenly breaking through the dark clouds of misery. He was beside himself with joy. When the Maharani put the delicious *laddoos* in his mouth with her own hands, his body quivered with joy; he wagged his little tail and flapped his ears. His trunk would gently brush past the Maharani's hands, and touch her feet. Had the prince been present, he would have sensed that what Bum really wanted to do was to wrap his trunk round the Maharani's waist and lift her up to his head.

"Bum Bahadur," the Maharani said, "it is the prince's wish that if he is unable to make his weekly visit to you, I should take his place. He also wishes that henceforth no complaint about you should reach his ears."

Bum Bahadur raised his trunk and then, with its tip drew a circle on the ground round the Maharani's feet.

"Your Highness!" the mahout explained, "Bum is taking a

vow that he will always act according to your wishes."

The Maharani was extremely tender-hearted. Every time any one greeted her, be it man or beast, a person of high or of low rank, her hands would automatically join in *namaskar*. On their first meeting Bum had merely touched the Maharani's folded hands. This time he could not restrain himself—he curled his trunk round her bare wrists, for a fleeting moment and then stepped back as if in deference to her status.

Matadin did not like this and rebuked Bum.

"No! No!" protested the Maharani, "You must never scold Bum in my presence."

That day Matadin was in low spirits. But Bum was very happy and in high spirits. He did not even look angrily at Matadin.

That evening Matadin took away the sweet balls' weight of fodder from Bum's supper. Bum was very angry and refused to touch his meal. Next morning Matadin felt somewhat apprehensive and made good the shortage in Bum's rations.

The Maharani was true to her word and called on Bum Bahadur once every week. The welcome she received overjoyed her. It made her happy to think that a creature who was a veritable mountain and who could crush her frail little self with one swish of his trunk waited for her for a whole week and was all atremble with delight on seeing her. He would caress and kiss her; he would run the tip of his trunk over her hands, and touch her feet with it.

The Maharani's heart was filled with pride at the love she received from the beast. Bum, who could smash to smithereens the strongest pole or column would behave like a child in her presence. Like a child too his mouth would slobber as he kissed the Maharani's hands and feet. He wanted to stand as close to her as he could. Every time she finished feeding him, Bum would put his trunk round her slender waist and hoist her to his head. And he did it more tenderly than any mother picking up her child. The Maharani would have his chains removed and Bum would go prancing all over the stable. He would take her back to the palace, again raise his trunk in salutation, caress her feet with it and then in one swift movement wrap it round her waist. The next moment, the Maharani would find herself standing on the ground with not a fold of her sari out of place.

The prince became preoccupied with state affairs. He was often away from the palace and was no longer able to visit the elephant stable. The Maharani on the other hand became a more frequent visitor and obviously looked forward to her visits. The day before she would order sweetmeats to be prepared and saw to it that they were of different delicacies. She always fed Bum Bahadur with her own hands. She used to ponder on how much more tender was the love that a beast gave her than the love she had ever received from a human being.

Meanwhile Bum's loathing of Matadin increased in the same proportion as his love for his Maharani got stronger. Matadin had been gifted a plot of land by the prince. On this plot he had raised a hut surrounded by a small garden. While he was looking after his own comforts he continued to deprive Bum Bahadur of his full ration of food. For two days Bum Bahadur refused to touch his food, or even look at Matadin.

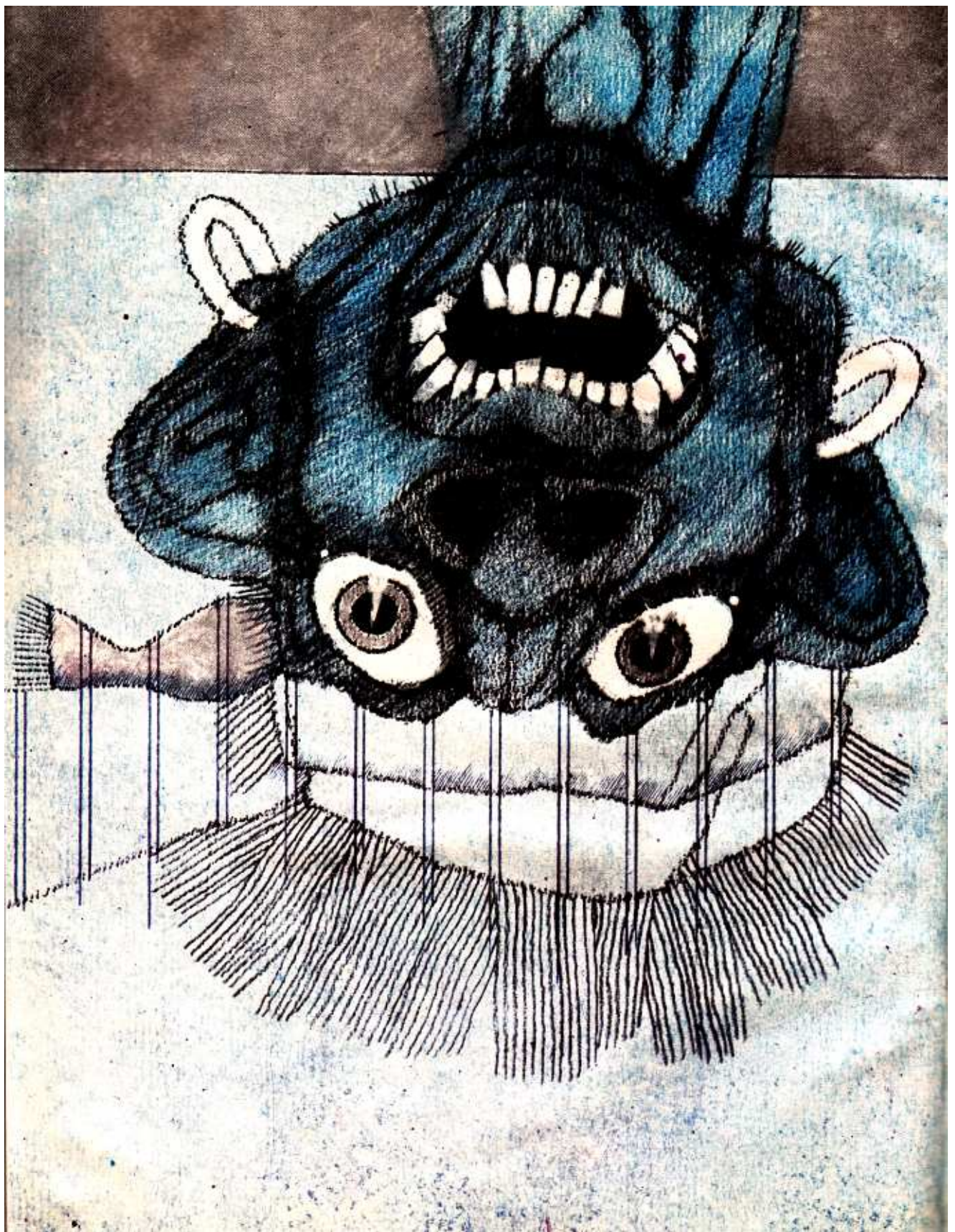
One day the prince decided to go out hunting. In the past whenever he had gone out on a tiger-shoot he always rode on Bum Bahadur. This time Matadin felt uneasy about the state of Bum's mind. He told the prince that Bum had been ailing for the last two days and he had been obliged to get another trained elephant for the purpose.

The hunting party passed by the stable. As Bum saw it through an open window he set up a loud, wailing trumpet of protest. No one paid any attention to him. He felt crushed and fell silent.

After seeing off the hunting party, Matadin went into his garden and got busy with his plants and flower-beds. Although his wages were meagre, it was known that he lived in considerable comfort.

Bum sulked and brooded the whole day, chewing the cud of venom in his breast. He did not touch a morsel of food. By the afternoon stable attendants noticed something odd about him, and reported it to Matadin. Matadin came, and began to shout at Bum. Without so much as a glance Bum turned his back to the mahout.

Matadin made sure that the chains round Bum's feet were properly fastened before he gave the elephant a sound thrashing. But as he turned round to see if Bum had eaten his fodder, Bum's trunk suddenly shot out like lightning and sent Matadin sprawling on





the ground. Bum placed his massive foot on the mahout's chest. In the twinkling of an eye Matadin was crushed to a pulp. Bum broke his chains; the attendants ran helter skelter in sheer panic.

Bum Bahadur strode out of the stable and headed towards Matadin's garden. He uprooted the plants and trampled on the flower-beds. Matadin's children took fright and ran out of the hut. Bum pulled down the hut and reduced it to a heap of rubble.

The news reached the Maharani's ears that Bum Bahadur had run amuck.

The Superintendent of Police asked for permission to shoot the elephant because it might do more harm to others.

"But you just told me that Matadin is the only one he has harmed," protested the Maharani.

"Your Highness, my information is that he is heading towards the house of Matadin's brother—I am sure he will not spare him either."

"Matadin's brother? What does he do?"

"He is in charge of the stables, Your Highness."

"Then he must be as big a thief as Matadin," said the Maharani. "Why should it be necessary to kill Bum Bahadur? Please take me to him at once."

The Maharani withdrew to her rooms, and draped herself in the sari she had worn on her last visit to Bum Bahadur.

"Your Highness is running a great risk. It can be very dangerous," protested the police officer.

"Do as I tell you," commanded the Maharani. "Get my car. You can take any security measures you think necessary."

A little later the Maharani's car was seen speeding along the road followed by a posse of armed cavalry. From the other end of the same road came Bum Bahadur. He stopped by the side of a pond, filled his trunk with water and resumed his journey. Anyone who dared to come near him was rewarded with a splash of dirty water. Bum did no more harm to anyone.

When there was only a furlong between them the Maharani stopped the car and got out. She forbade the Superintendent of Police from coming with her.

"You can keep your cavalry in readiness," she ordered. "If I raise both my hands you can take it as a signal to shoot. But in no

case should you fire on your own. Something tells me that Bum Bahadur has not run amuck."

Bum Bahadur saw the car and stopped. His eyes fell on the rifles aimed at him. He decided to charge. As he picked up speed and got close to the car, the Maharani stepped in his path. The Superintendent alerted his men to get ready to shoot.

The Maharani turned round and shouted at the top of her voice, "Don't shoot until you get the signal from me."

Then she ran to meet Bum Bahadur.

There were only fifty yards between the Maharani and the elephant. The Superintendent, and his cavalry galloped forward. Bum Bahadur stopped dead in his tracks. The Maharani ordered the men not to advance any further. With slow measured steps the Maharani approached the elephant. At last Bum Bahadur saw her. He raised his trunk in salutation. The Maharani responded by folding her hands. But Bum did not touch her hands as he used to do in the past.

"My dear Bum Bahadur," said the Maharani with affection. "I see that your trunk is not clean today. But even though you have not touched me, I feel your trunk all over my body. Tell me, Bum Bahadur, how have you come to this sorry state?"

With the tip of his trunk, Bum drew many circles round the Maharani's feet as though the circles represented all the anguish in his heart.

"I know what is passing through the heart of my brave Bum Bahadur," said the Maharani in a voice full of tenderness. "I know you are not mad. Bitterness has seared your beautiful soul. I know what hate and bitterness can do to people."

Bum Bahadur drew another circle round her feet. The Maharani looked into the elephant's eyes. She could see the tears well up in them.

"Where were you making for, Bum Bahadur? Towards Matadin's brother's house? Did he also cause you pain?"

Bum Bahadur lifted his right foot and stamped it on the ground. The Maharani noticed that the foot was spattered with blood.

She continued talking to him, "Bum Bahadur, those who inject the poison of hate into the hearts of brave people only play with

death. I will see to it that no one causes you hurt anymore. I will see that no one robs you. I will protect you from evil men who look like human beings but are real devils at heart."

Bum Bahadur listened in silence. The Maharani continued to speak to him, "Dear Bum Bahadur, I do understand how anger has got the better of love in your heart. How could you have pulled down the hut in which Matadin's children lived. They did you no harm. You will have to put it up again."

Bum Bahadur drew two circles round the feet of the Maharani. The Maharani continued, "I know you are sorry for having done it. You will make me very happy if you put it up again. I shall have it rebuilt on the condition that you will live on half your rations till it has been paid for. Do you agree?"

We do not know whether Bum Bahadur understood what the Maharani said. Drawing circles was the only language he knew; and he drew many circles.

The Maharani noticed that the mud on the elephant's trunk had caked. She stretched out her hand and caressed the trunk. Earlier it was the elephant who would try to convey his love to the Maharani. Now it was the Maharani who was trying to tell him how much she loved him. There he stood like a mountain, alive but unwilling to move lest the vision of love and beauty be shattered.

The Maharani broke the spell by beckoning Bum Bahadur to follow her. She walked in front with the elephant following her and behind them came the police officer and his cavalry. And so Bum Bahadur was escorted back to the stable.

The management of the stables was changed. All elephants except Bum Bahadur were given their full rations. Nevertheless Bum Bahadur behaved as if he was the king of the stables.

The Maharani did not visit the stable for many days. After some time she called on Bum Bahadur and spoke to him, "Your half rations seem to have agreed with you; you look healthier and happier than ever before. Now you have atoned for your sin, you will always be happy."

Bum Bahadur picked up the Maharani in his trunk and seated her on his head.

Translated from Punjabi by Bhisham Sahni

The Stamp Album

by Sundara Ramaswamy

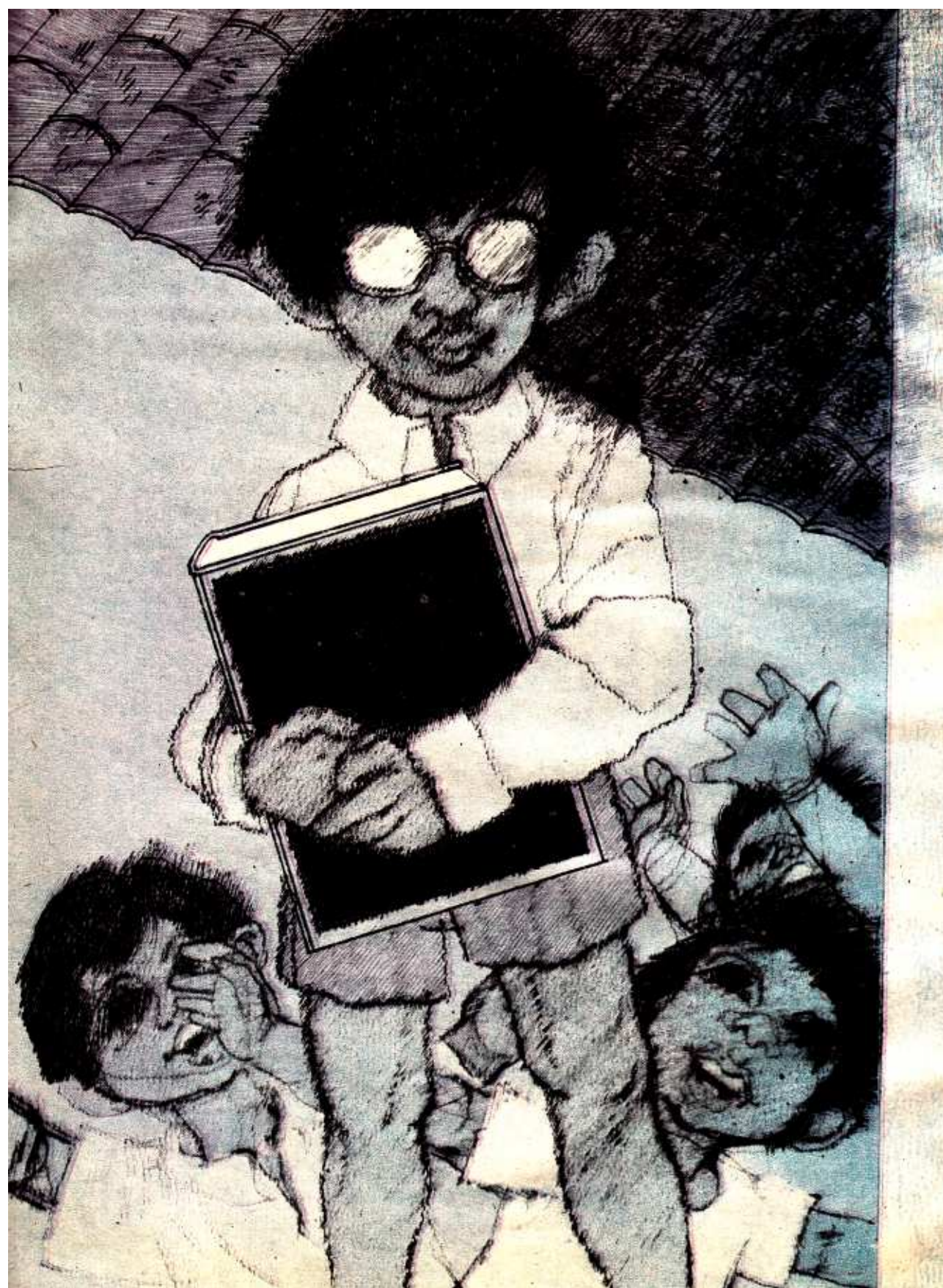
Rajappa sensed a sudden drop in his popularity. For the past three days everyone had been crowding around Nagarajan.

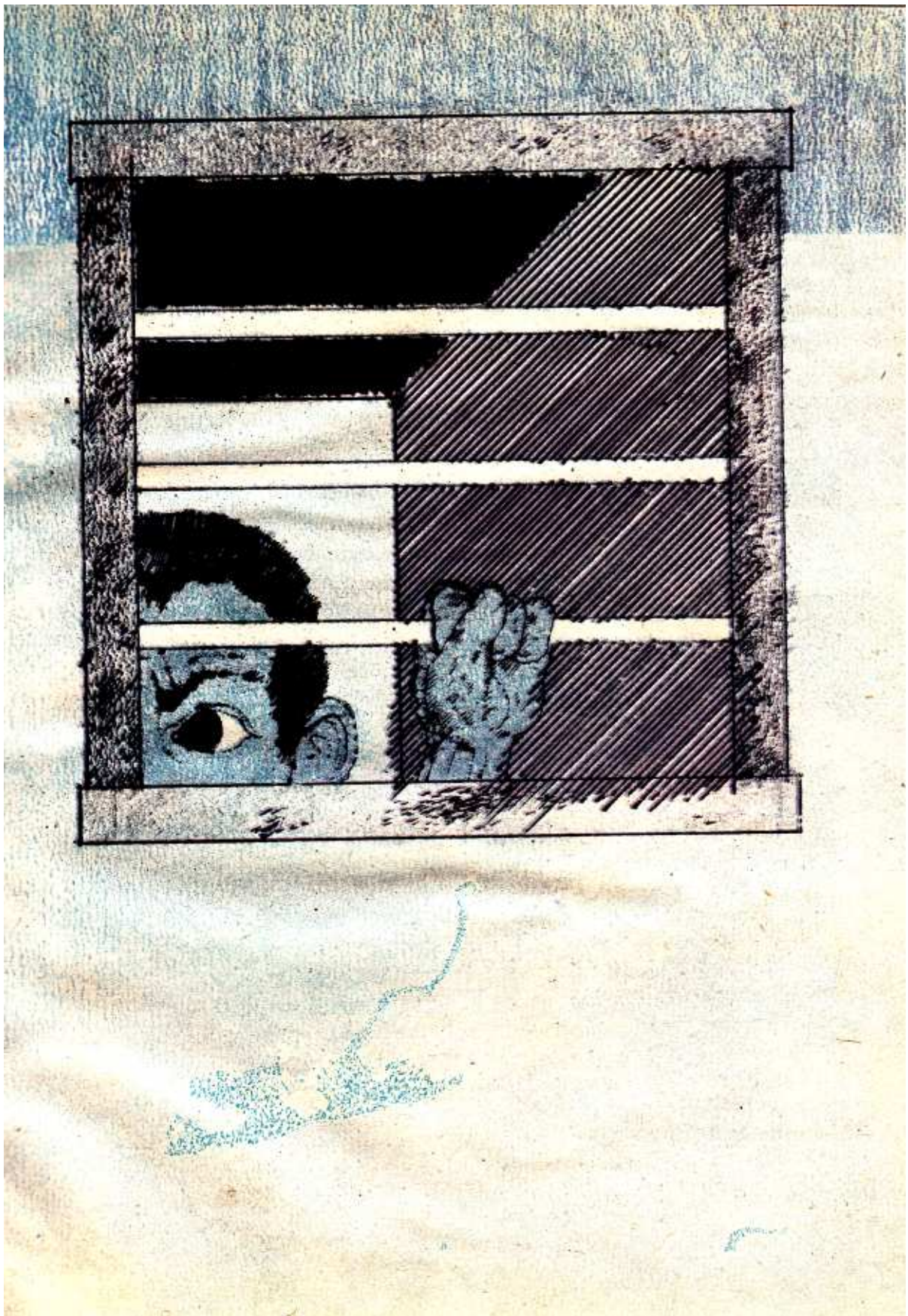
Rajappa tried to tell them that Nagarajan had become swollen-headed, but no one paid any attention to him. For Nagarajan was generous in sharing the stamp album his uncle had sent from Singapore. The boys gathered around Nagarajan and devoured the album with their eyes till the school-bell rang for the morning class; they hovered round him at lunch-break and in the evening invaded his house. Nagarajan showed the album to all of them without a trace of impatience. He only made one stipulation: "No one must touch the album." He opened it out on his lap and turned over the pages himself and let everyone gaze to their fill.

The girls wanted to have a look at the album too. The boldest of them, Parvathi, came up to Nagarajan and asked him on behalf of the girls. Nagarajan gave her the album after putting a jacket on it. The album was returned to him in the evening after all the girls had seen it.

No one now mentioned Rajappa's album or paid him any attention.

Once Rajappa's album had been very famous. Rajappa collected stamps in the painstaking way bees collect honey. It was his whole life. He would set out early in the morning to visit other stamp-collectors. He would barter two Pakistans for a solitary U.S.S.R. In the evening he would dump his school books in a corner, stuff a snack in the pocket of his shorts, gulp down a cup of coffee and dash out again. Four miles away a boy had a Canada... He had had the biggest album in his class. The Revenue Officer's son wanted to buy it for twenty-five rupees. The cheek of it! Rajappa retaliated, "Will you sell your baby brother to me for thirty rupees!" The boys applauded his retort.





But now no one looked at his album. And worse still, they made unfavourable comparisons with Nagarajan's saying his album wasn't fit to hold a candle to Nagarajan's.

Rajappa refused to look at Nagarajan's album. When other boys hovered over it, he turned his face away. But he did try to glance at it through the corner of his eye. It was indeed a beauty! Maybe it didn't have the same stamps as Rajappa's and might even have had not as many as his, but it was the only one of its kind. No local shop had one like it.

Nagarajan's uncle had written his nephew's name in bold letters on the first page of the album: A.S. NAGARAJAN. This was followed by an inscription:

To the shameless wretch trying to steal this album—See thou my name above? This is my album. It is my property and mine alone as long as the grass is green, the lotus red, the sun rises in the east and sets in the west.

The boys copied the lines in their albums. So did the girls in their books and notebooks.

Rajappa growled, "Why are you such copycats?"

The boys glared at him and Krishnan retorted, "Get lost, you jealous worm!"

"Jealous! Me! Why should I be? My album is much bigger, isn't it?"

"Yours doesn't have stamps like his! Look at the Indonesian beauty—hold it up and see it against the light."

"He doesn't have the stamps I have!"

"Ha! Show us one he hasn't!"

"You show me one I haven't. Let's have a ten rupee bet."

"Your album is only fit for the dustbin, taunted Krishnan. And the boys chanted, "Garbage album! Garbage album!"

Rajappa realised the futility of continuing the argument.

How long it had taken him to build up his stamp-collection! He had built it stamp by stamp and then the postman had brought this album from Singapore and overnight Nagarajan had become all-important! The boys didn't know the difference between the two albums. And no amount of explaining would make the slightest difference.

Rajappa raged within. He began to hate going to school. How was he to face the boys? Usually on Saturdays and Sundays he hectically stamp hunted but this weekend he barely stirred out of the house. Usually, not a day passed without his turning the pages of his album, over and over again. Even at night he would sneak out of bed to look at the album. But two days had passed and he had not touched it. The sight of it filled him with anger. Compared to Nagarajan's, his album now seemed a bundle of rags.

In the evening Rajappa went to Nagarajan's house. He had made up his mind—he couldn't put up with his ignominy any longer. After all, Nagarajan had only just chanced upon a stamp album. What did he know of the mysteries of stamp-collecting? Or how the experts evaluated them? He probably believed that the bigger the stamp, the more valuable it was. Or one from a powerful country more important than one from a weaker country. After all Nagarajan was only an amateur. Rajappa could easily palm off on him the less valuable stamps and walk away with the good ones. He had fooled many others before. The world of stamp-collecting was rife with cunning and trickery and Nagarajan was only a beginner.

Rajappa went straight upstairs to Nagarajan's room. No one stopped him for he was a frequent visitor to the house. Rajappa sat down at Nagarajan's desk. A little later Nagarajan's younger sister, Kamakshi, came in. "Brother has gone to town," she said. "Have you seen his new album?"

Rajappa mumbled something unintelligible.

"It's a real beauty, isn't it? I believe no one else in school has one like it."

"Who said that?"

"My brother."

"It's just a big album, no more. Is it enough merely to be oversized?"

Kamakshi didn't reply and walked off.

Rajappa scanned the books littered on the table. His hand grazed against the lock of the table drawer. Almost involuntarily he tugged at it. It was firmly locked. Why not open it? The key lay among the books. Rajappa went over to the staircase and glanced around. No one was in sight. He opened the drawer. Nagarajan's stamp album was right on top. Rajappa turned over the first page

and read the inscription. His heart began to pound. He closed the drawer and locked it. He thrust the album into his shorts and let his shirt fall over it. He hurried down the steps and ran home.

On reaching home he hid the album behind his bookshelf. His body felt as though it was on fire, his throat was dry and blood pounded in his head.

Finally at eight in the evening Appu, who lived opposite, came and told Rajappa that Nagarajan's stamp album was missing. Nagarajan and he had gone down to town in the evening and when they returned, the album was gone!

Rajappa didn't utter a word. He prayed that Appu would go away. And when Appu did go away, he hurried to his room and bolted the door. He took out the album from behind the shelf. His hand froze. What if somebody was watching from the window? He shoved the album back behind the shelf.

Rajappa hardly touched his dinner. The family was concerned and asked if he was feeling unwell.

Maybe sleep would bring peace? Rajappa lay down on his bed. But sleep eluded him. What if somebody stumbled upon the hidden album while he was asleep? He got up, took out the album and put it under his pillow.

Rajappa hadn't woken up when Appu appeared in the morning. Appu had just been to Nagarajan's again.

"I'm told you were at his house yesterday."

Rajappa felt his heart sink. He gave a non-committal nod.

"Kamakshi says you were the only one to call at the house while Nagarajan and I had gone down to town."

Rajappa detected the suspicion in Appu's tone.

"Nagarajan has been crying all night. His father might send for the police."

Rajappa didn't say a word.

Nagarajan's father worked in the police superintendent's office. He had only to lift his little finger and the whole police force would be out to trace the album.

Fortunately for Rajappa, Appu's brother arrived to fetch his brother. For a long time after he had left Rajappa sat still on his bed. His father finished breakfast and left for office on his bicycle.

There was a knock at the front door. Was it the police?

Rajappa grabbed the album from under his pillow and ran upstairs and shoved it behind a bookshelf. What if the police made a search? He took it out of the bookshelf, tucked it under his shirt and came downstairs.

Someone was still knocking on the door. Rajappa's mother shouted from the kitchen, "Why don't you open the door?" She was sure to go and unbolt it herself in a few seconds.

Rajappa ran to the back of the house. He went into the bathroom and closed the door. There was a large oven in the bathroom for heating the bath-water. Rajappa threw the album in the fire. The album burned, and with it all the precious stamps that were unavailable anywhere. Tears filled Rajappa's eyes.

Mother was shouting, "Hurry up! Nagarajan has come to see you."

Rajappa took off his shorts and wrapping himself with a wet towel came out of the bathroom. He put on a fresh shirt and shorts and went upstairs. Nagarajan was sitting in a chair.

"My stamp album is lost," Nagarajan said in a broken voice. His face was grief-stricken and his eyes red-rimmed and swollen with hours of crying.

"Where had you kept it?" Rajappa asked.

"I am sure I had put it in the table drawer. I had locked the drawer too. I went out for a short while and when I returned it was gone."

Tears streamed down his face. Rajappa felt so guilty he could hardly look at his friend. "Don't cry," he mumbled.

But the more he tried to console Nagarajan the more the boy cried.

Rajappa ran downstairs and was back in a moment. He had his stamp album in his arms.

"Nagarajan, here's my album. It's yours. Don't look at me in that way! I mean it, really. The album is for you."

"You're joking..."

"No. I am giving it to you. Honestly. It's all yours from today. Keep it."

Nagarajan couldn't believe his eyes. Rajappa giving his album away! But Rajappa kept urging him to take it.

"What about you?" Nagarajan asked.

"I don't want it any more."

"Not even a stamp?"

"No, not one."

"But how will you live without your stamps?"

Rajappa's eyes brimmed with tears.

"Don't cry, Rajappa. You don't have to give away your album. Keep it. You worked so hard on it."

"No. You keep it. It's for you. Take it home. Please take it and go away," screamed Rajappa.

Nagarajan was baffled. He took the album and came down. Rajappa followed him, wiping his tears with his shirt-end.

They stood at the door. "Thank you," Nagarajan said. "Bye."

Nagarajan had stepped into the street when Rajappa called out to him.

Nagarajan turned.

"Please...please give me the album just for tonight. I will hand it back to you tomorrow morning."

Nagarajan agreed and went away.

Rajappa climbed the stairs and bolted the door of his room. Holding the album tightly, he sobbed his heart out.

Translated from Tamil by Ashokamitran

The Story of Appu

by Randhi Somaraju

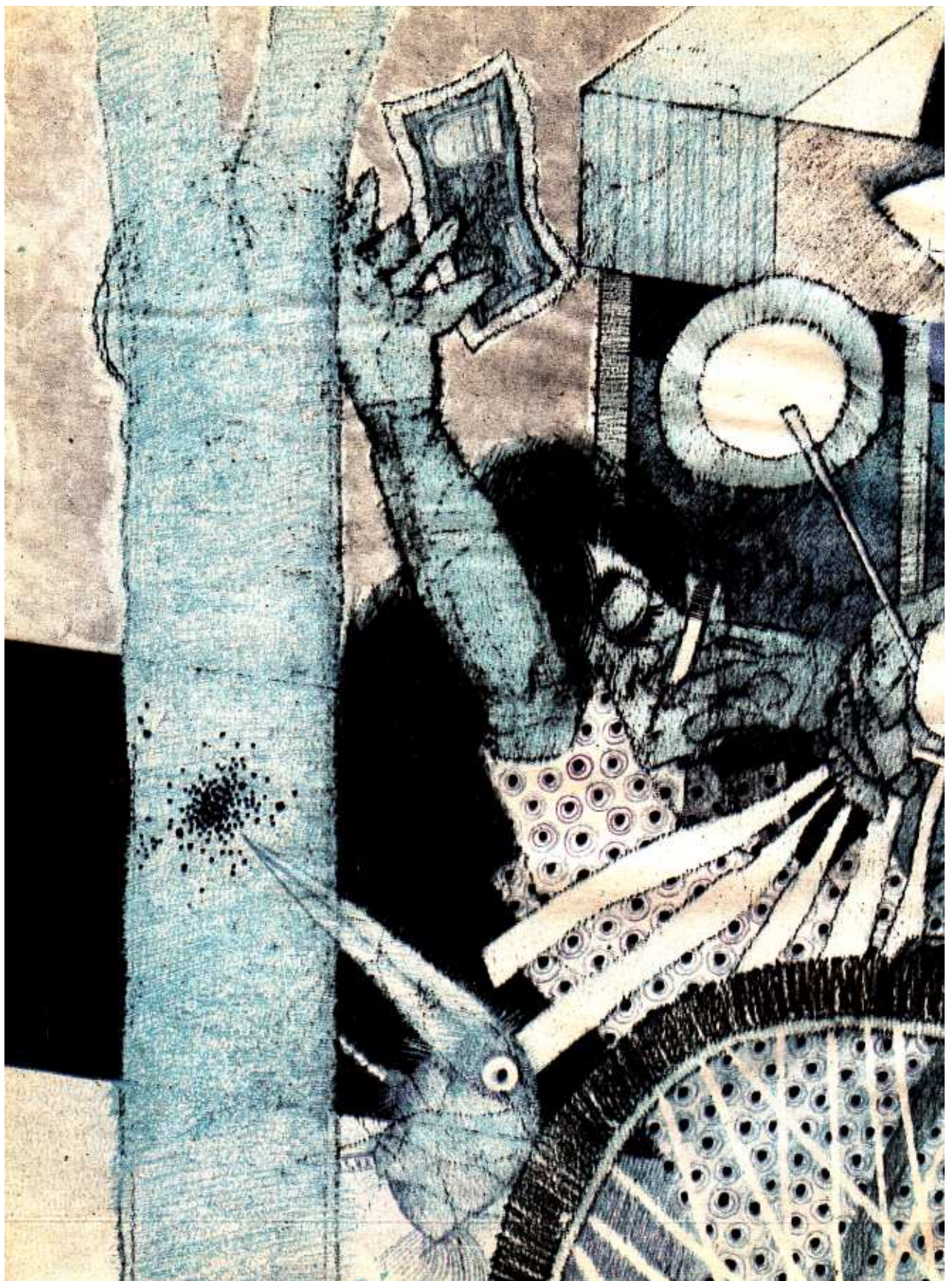
There was a small village called Pearl Island. But neither were pearls collected in the village nor was it an island. Perhaps the village was named so because it was far away and isolated and difficult to reach. The nearest town was miles away—a two-mile trek to Gudem, an overnight boat journey to Palem, an hour's horse-cart ride to Gortipadu, and then three hours by bus. By rail, the journey from the city was four hundred miles long.

In Pearl Island there lived a boy named Appu. In spite of staying in this tiny village, Appu had the manner and extravagant habits of a townsman. He had no value for money and spent wastefully. In the morning he would go to the village tea-shop and eat all kinds of titbits. He hailed every hawker and bought whatever the man was selling. He stuffed himself till his stomach was bloated. In the evening he went to the village square and again gorged himself.

Appu was not only a glutton, he was also a dandy. Every day he carelessly tore his clothes while playing and demanded new ones. And what was more he always lost or misplaced his books and pencils and asked for new stationery. Appu bullied his mother for money every day and if he ran out of funds he knew he could always extort more.

You see, Appu was the only son of his parents, and they indulged his every whim. But when he began squandering money recklessly his parents became anxious. His father tried to reprimand him but Appu took no notice. He pretended to listen attentively but his father's words went in from one ear and out of the other.

Moreover Appu had also begun smoking. When his father heard about it, he was furious and scolded Appu angrily. Appu began to cry bitterly; his mother was very upset and taking him in her arms comforted him. Then she gave him some money and sent





him off to play. Appu's father was very unhappy. He blamed himself for his son's bad habits and spendthrift ways. Was it too late to remedy the situation? After much thought Appu's father decided to ask his son's teacher's advice and help. The teacher promised to do his best.

One day, the teacher sent for Appu. Patting him affectionately he asked Appu to come to his house in the afternoon. Appu was filled with trepidation. Why did the teacher want to see him? Was it about his class-work? Did he want to question him about the multiplication tables?

Appu stood at the door hesitantly. The teacher invited him in, spoke to him gently and made him sit down. The teacher's manner somewhat reassured Appu, his heartbeat returned to normal, and he relaxed.

"We have the term examinations next month, Appu. I hope you are well prepared?" the teacher asked gently. Appu nodded. He wondered what the teacher was leading up to. But the teacher just picked up the newspaper and began to read.

Appu looked around idly. His eyes fell on a picture on the back page of the newspaper. It was a photograph of the launching of a spaceship. Looking at the picture intently Appu had the impression that he was seated in the rocket, being catapulted into space. Appu was thrilled. His head buzzed with questions but he hesitated to voice them.

Just then, the teacher lifted his head and looked at Appu. "Did you want to ask me something?"

"S...i...r...er... can we really go to the moon?" Appu asked, his eyes glowing.

"So, you saw the picture in the newspaper. It's called a rocket. It can take man to the moon. The Americans have made it."

Many thoughts flashed across Appu's mind. His head was filled with dreams.

"Does one have to go to America to ride in a rocket?" he asked.

"Of course."

"How far is America, Sir?"

"About ten thousand miles from here. A couple of days by aeroplane and about three weeks by ship."

"Where does one board the aeroplane? From Pearl Island?"

The teacher smiled. "No. The only international airports are in big cities like Madras and Bombay. It costs a lot of money to travel by air, you know!"

Appu was very excited. Questions tumbled from his lips. "How much money does one need to travel by air?"

"Lots and lots of money. One has to stint and save to see the world and its wonders."

"But how much exactly, Sir," Appu persisted.

The teacher was pleased. "Do you want to travel and see the world? Better start saving now. You can go when you are grown up. You know son, even the boat journey to Palem costs a quarter-rupee!"

"I know, Sir. It's half-a-rupee by horse-cart to Gortipadu and one-and-a-half-rupees by bus to town."

"Well, travel is expensive. It takes three days to reach Bombay. Imagine the cost of the train ticket!"

"Will a hundred rupees be enough?" Appu asked innocently.

The teacher laughed.

"My dear young man, no one will give you a free air-ticket to America. You will have to have six or seven thousand rupees. Your family's entire property is not worth that. And going in a rocket costs a few lakhs of rupees!"

Appu was totally disheartened. How could he possibly raise so much money?

"There is another way, son," said the teacher.

Appu's face brightened.

"If you study hard and do well, the Government may pay for your trip. But, you will still need a great deal of money for further study." And the teacher added, "Son, money is valuable. You need money for every thing."

Appu was silent. He was deep in thought.

"Ask your father to begin saving," the teacher continued. "Let him not be wasteful. He will have to save every penny for your education and your future. Tell me, does your father waste money?"

Appu could not lift his head. He was filled with remorse. He remembered his dirty clothes, his torn books, his gluttony. His eyes filled with tears.

The teacher hugged him proudly.
A little pearl shone brightly that day in the small village of
Pearl Island.

Translated from Telugu by V. Patanjali

The Price of Pride

by Siraj Anwar

You know that a pearl can be so valuable that it is said to be without price. Pearls are formed inside oysters who live on the ocean-bed inside their shells. This is the story of one such oyster.

This oyster was very pleased with himself because he believed that he was the most important creature in the world. Of course, the silkworm was quite useful too, but silk did not fetch the same price as pearls, so the oyster felt that he had good reason to think well of himself.

One day, there was a great storm in the sea. The waves were high and rough, and the elements so frightening that our friend, the oyster, clamped down the lid of his frail shell, and stayed firmly on the sea floor. He thought it beneath his dignity to try and move towards the shore for safety. The waves were so strong though that, in spite of his resolve, he and his shell were picked up and flung on to the shore. Finding himself on an open beach, he cautiously lifted the lid of his shell and, through the slit, peeped out at the world. As he was peering about, another big wave picked him up, and threw him further up on to the sand. Now, this was really alarming! The waves washed over him and rolled him about, but none of them was powerful enough to pull him back into the sea; and the poor oyster stayed where he was. There was no way of getting back into the sea, and he became extremely angry.

There was a small tree near the shore. A crow sat on it for a long time, watching the plight of the oyster. Finally, he flew down and knocked on the shell with his beak. "Who's inside? Open the door," he asked sharply.

The oyster was displeased. "Some vulgar wretch is trying to disturb me," he said to himself, then shouted, "Who is it?"

"I am not a wretch. I am a crow. And a clever crow at that. Open the door and come out."

"Why should I come out?"

"Just to have a little chat, that's all," said the crow smoothly.

"I haven't time to chat—and I'm not coming out."

"Well, all right then. But what are you doing in there?"

"I'm busy making a pearl. And anyway, why should I bother to talk to a nasty, ugly thing like you," said the oyster grandly.

"Oho—how superior," laughed the crow. "My dear friend, all I wanted was to ask you a few questions about the shape and size of the sea and I wanted to tell you a few things about the wide world outside."

"Why?"

"Because I'm very interested in Science. I live on the roof of a university and I hear all the lectures of the Science professor, so I've become fond of Science. That's why I want to hear about the sea, and what happens there. Do you find doves' and sparrows' eggs there?"

"What rubbish!" said the oyster curtly. "As if you have doves and sparrows in the sea."

"But that's just what I wanted to know from you."

"Don't ask such silly questions," the oyster said. "The sea has millions of shells—like mine. But I am the greatest of all, so I don't talk to the other shells. There are thousands of varieties of coloured fish, and thousands of different plants, and that is all. And there are no silly, stupid animals like you down there."

The crow laughed. "I don't mind you calling me stupid, but actually I'm not stupid. I'm a crow—and a clever crow too. But, old pal, you are telling me all this from inside your little den. Why don't you come out?"

"Haven't you any manners? How dare you be so familiar. I'm no pal of yours."

"Well, you do talk as if you were the king of the sea!"

"Of course—I'm the one who makes pearls which make the sea famous. It's all because of me," said the oyster.

"In that case," said the crow with a chuckle, "I simply must have a look at you because I've never yet seen such a wonderful thing."

"I'm not a thing—I am the oyster that makes pearls."

"All right, all right. But please, Your Majesty, won't you come

out, and give me the opportunity to have a look at you?" the crow said good-humouredly.

"No. No. No. No. I can't open the door. I'm very busy."

"You can make your pearl later. Just open the door—I'm only a poor, ordinary crow who wants to look at someone as important as you—someone who can make a pearl. I want to see the pearl too. You see, I've never seen a pearl before in my life."

"I've just told you that I won't open the door. And if you think you're so clever, why don't you open it yourself?"

The oyster could taunt him like this because he was sure that the crow would never be able to open the lid of his shell.

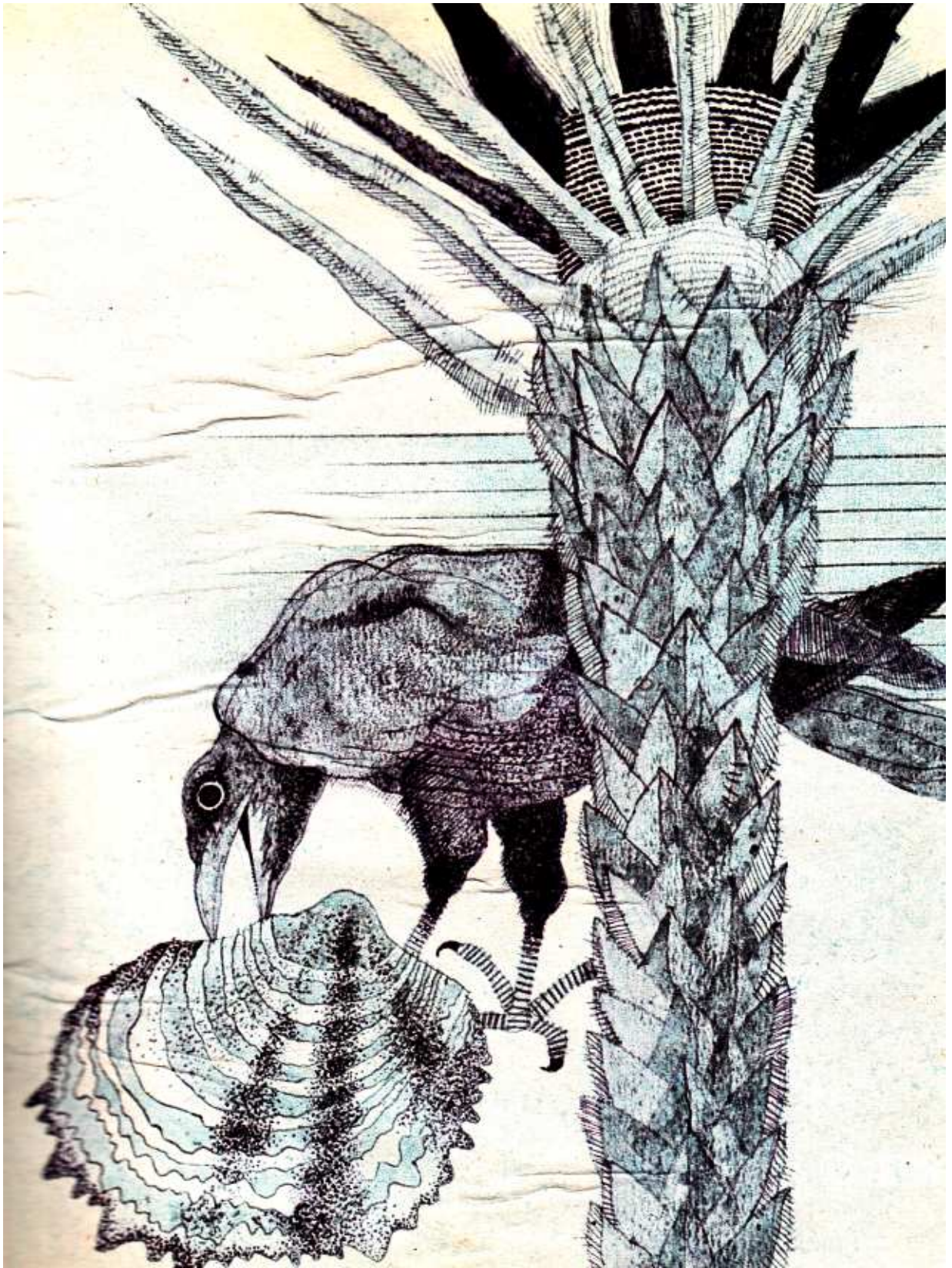
But now the crow was angry.

"All right, if that's what you want," he said. "I'll show you. And don't blame me if you don't like what happens."

The crow picked up the shell in his beak and flew off with it—high, high up. He reached a ledge of rock; and from his great height he dropped the shell straight on to the rock. The shell splintered into a million fragments. The crow swooped down after it. He grabbed the oyster in his beak, and in one gulp, swallowed it.

The crow then caught sight of the pearl as it was rolling away from him. He watched the priceless pearl as it fell into a blob of cowdung. Then he lifted himself once more into the air, and flew away, cawing happily.

Translated from Urdu by Laeeq Futehally





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